

Raven's Apprentice

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Summary: What happens when Raven gets an apprentice? *some pages may require more maturity- there will be warnings though - some Nero/OC (rated T for scenes of violence, exc.)*

1. Piper

****NOTE: Enjoy! ****

****Chapter 1****

Dr. Nero's office doors slid open and Raven marched in, holding someone who could have been her twin by the collar.

"Max, we found this one lurking around here and trying to get in. It seems that she was the cause of the security breach earlier."

"Let me down," the girl said, "and I swear I will explain."

Nero gave a nod, and Raven deposited the girl in a chair facing his desk.

"First of all, who are you?" Nero questioned, his domineering manner taking over. The girl looked like she could be a relative of Raven's. Her hair was jet black but curly, and her ice cold blue eyes were an exact duplicate of Raven's. She did not, however, have a scar down her pale face. She only had freckles.

"My name's Piper and I need your help. First of all, there are people coming after me," she explained, looking Nero in the eye.

"Who?" He inquired, raising an eyebrow. Raven paced around the room, watching Piper with interest. The girl looked younger than her, but only by a few years. Her battle fatigues looked dirty, but reminiscent of those of an agency that Raven had dealt with a few times before. This girl had made it through the countryside on foot,

and somehow had gotten to H.I.V.E. without any lava-based injuries.

"I honestly don't know. But they're after me, and I need a safe place to stay. H.I.V.E. seemed perfect, and I'm sure I could help you with your security. The people who are after me think I know too much. You see, I've had training in several agencies. I started in the IDF, but then I moved on to the Russian Special Forces. I learned about H.I.V.E., and you, Dr. Nero, through a training job at an agency called the SSK," said the girl, sounding genuinely scared.

"Yes, I've heard of the SSK. I've done some work with them and their employees. Go on."

"Well, they had me do some digging into G.L.O.V.E., and I found out something that I ****knew**** couldn't be right. You see, I thought this had been ended. I thought it was over, the program was deleted, even destroyedâ€¦ This information, along with the fact that I'm notâ€¦ normal, is why they're after me."

"Not normal?" Raven asked.

"I can mess with minds, and I've had tactical and physical training from some of the best. When I had to run through the London headquarters of the SSK, the men who were after me didn't stand a chance."

"We'll see about thatâ€¦" Raven muttered under her breath.

"Natalya," Nero warned. "What is this information, Piper?"

If it was possible, Piper would have turned paler. "Dr. Nero," she said, her gaze unwavering, "Overlord is alive."

2. Identity Crisis

****Chapter 2****

"Shel, have you heard about the new bodyguard?" Laura asked from her laptop. It was late at night, and only she, Shelby, Otto, and Wing were still gathered in front of the fireplace of the Alphas' accommodation block.

"Yep. H.I.V. says that she has the same security clearance as Raven. Piper Donlin, trained in several countries service branches. Could pass as Raven with some makeup and straightened hair, three years younger than Raven, thirteen or so below Nero. Trial training for the next month or so for possible bodyguard or security placement," Otto prattled off, pulling up Piper's security file on his Blackbox.

"Otto, you ****must ****be undergoing an identity crisis," Laura said, "or you and Shelby have gotten your brains switched somehow."

"Either way, Brand, I've heard of her now," Shelby yawned, thumping a book shut as she looked over her Stealth essay.

"Not to scare you, but I saw her in the training rooms, coming out from battle training with Raven. She did not strike me as the type that you would want to see angry," Wing chipped in.

"Hey, what's Raven think of her? Did anyone find out? I'm talking to our resident hackers hereâ€|"

"Aye, Raven's been tight-lipped about it, but she doesn't look too pleased," Laura replied as she typed, "I can only wonder why. If this Piper is as good as she seems, Raven's workload will be much less."

Laura snapped her laptop closed and scooped it up. "Good night, boys. Don't get in trouble." She headed off to her room.

Shelby followed her exit with a stack of books and papers.

"I for one," Otto said when the girls had left, "think that there is more going on than we know. Raven doesn't snap-judge into hate, especially with a possible assistant."

"I never said that they hate each other. I merely said that Raven was none too pleased when I saw them. She may have just had a long day fighting," Wing told him, "They do not ****hate**** each other."

"I'm surprised Nero even brought her on the team. After all, rumor has it that she just appeared on campus," Otto replied.

"If we listened to ****half**** of H.I.V.E.'s rumors, we would have gone insane a long time ago," Wing said, "But why does Nero need ****another**** bodyguard if Raven is unstoppable?"

"He must have his reasons," Otto told him, "but I can't think of any. I'm exhausted. Do us all a favor and hit the showers before bed. I don't fancy waking up to find the room smelling like the gym."

****Dr. Nero's Office â€" Sometime Late****

Maximilian Nero put his head in his hands, looking at all of the paperwork piled up in front of him. All of this for the conference in eight daysâ€| and he still had no clue as to where he was supposed to be going.

His office doors slid open, and Piper entered silently. Nero still stared at his papers, deep in concentration.

"Ummâ€| Dr. Nero?"

He looked up in surprise, although he knew that she was there. "Max. Please just call me Max," he smiled, "or at least Nero. Cut the formality."

She perched on a chair. "Max."

"What is it, Piper?"

"I'm just here to give you a fair warning that Raven will be up here soon. She is going through all of the security checks as we speak, and when she gets here, she won't be too happy. I'll let her tell you, but she found out that my abilities are far better than she

expected."

"I am nothing less than impressed, dear. How would you like to be my personal security detail? I am not planning on going anywhere too soon, but there is a conference coming upâ€|"

"Sir, I thought Raven was your bodyguard."

"**Formalities**, dear Piper. She has many missions of her own, and I fear that I may end up needing near-constant security with the news that you have brought me. Your looking like her will help, of course. Imagine Raven in two places at once."

"I would be honored. What will Raven say about this?"

"I imagine that she will not be too pleased. However, she needs less on her plate. I sometimes fear that she gets a bit overworked."

"As I said, it is an honor. If you don't mind, though, I'm going to pick up some more weapons and perhaps sweep the area. What will we do about night surveillance?"

"I'll have a room connected to my quarters within a day or so. Everything will be accounted for, don't worry. Pick up your weapons and take your Blackbox to Professor Pike for some updates on your security clearance and see if he has developed any **new** weapons for you. You may want to talk it over with Colonel Francisco too. Then please come and pick me up to go to my quarters. For now, you will be accommodated with the Alphas. Is that alright?"

"Wonderful. Thank you, Dr. Nero. Max." She turned and left, Nero watching her walk out with a smile.

3. Raving Raven

Soon enough, a livid Raven stormed into Nero's office. "What is that thing?!" she demanded, putting her hands on his desk.

"Natalya, what has gotten into you?" Nero asked calmly.

"Max, who **is** she? We were sparring, and she got a direct shot at my neck. With the real katanas, she got a side shot at my ribs, and you know that I **never** allow for that. In hand-to-hand combat, she got me in a chokehold!"

"Amazing," Dr. Nero said as Raven glared pure hate.

"Max, this is **not funny**. There is **no one** on this earth â€" no one human, anyways â€" that is better than I am, **and you know it**."

"Natalya, she is **NOT** competition. She is here to help get some of the work off of your shoulders, and you must remember that."

"What is she supposed to be doing around here? Surely she won't take over **my** missions? Or will she take over security? Or, rather, will she tail the Malpense boy so he cannot get out of our vision and make **more** work for me?" Raven was almost raving now.

"No, Natalya. She will not take your exciting work from you. Rather, she will be set on a more dangerous, yet more monotonous tailing operation. She will serve as my bodyguard."

WHAT?! Raven screamed, "You don't understand, Max! She beat me. **SHE BEAT ME!***"

"I understand far more than you know, Natalya."

4. Remember the Emperor

Otto and Wing walked into the library a few days later. They had exactly forty-eight hours to finish a six-page Stealth essay that they had not even begun to research yet. Piper sat typing something on her Blackbox and held a cup of coffee in one hand. She didn't look up as the boys sat down at a nearby table, their arms loaded with books.

"Good morning, Malpense. Fanchu."

"Hi Piper. Mind if I ask what you're up to?"

"Oh, nothing much. I'm only checking the schematics of the room that they built for me near the occupant whom I must guard. I'm checking out all of the entrances and exits," she said as the display zoomed in on some blueprints.

"So you're trying to figure out how to get into Nero's room through the air ducts? I think he'd be **just** as glad if you strolled right through the door," Otto replied.

Wing punched his arm as Piper said, "Shut it, Malpense. The purpose of a guard is to be aware of all of the possibilities." She shut her Blackbox and got up, remarking, "I'd better be upstairs. Nero will want an escort to breakfast."

She left them alone in the immense library. "There's no need to punch me. I was being honest. At least if Nero is **human** at all."

"Otto! We honestly should get some research done before breakfast," Wing scolded him.

"I guess we should. Still, she's a bodyguard nowâ€¦interesting. I wonder how Raven is taking it," Otto commented. He pulled up the building's schematics on his own Blackbox, but the warning was clear when he tried to access the plans for Nero's wing. The bold "***ACCESS DENIED***" was enough to know that hacking it would take too much time, and he would be working well into breakfast.

A Few Hours Later â€" Shroud Prep Area

The doors of the Shroud opened silently, and Piper stepped aboard carrying what looked like a shopping bag. Nero was following her, but Raven stopped him short of the Shroud.

"Max, are you sure about this?" she whispered.

"It is only Paris, Natalya. She will be fine. Don't worry; I'm not

going in totally unarmed," Nero told her with complete confidence.

"Tell her to get down here."

Nero went up into the Shroud, and Raven called out, "G-d help you, Max!"

Piper came down as the engines started to power up before launch.

"Look, kid. He is in your hands now. If **he** goes down, **H.I.V.E.** goes down. If that happens, you will be the first one that I will go looking for. If he dies, the blood is completely on **your hands**. Got it?"

"Yes. Hold down the fort, Raven."

"Watch it," Raven warned, handing Piper a pair of katana swords crackling with purple pulses of energy, "Courtesy of Professor Pike, to match mine. Remember, if **he's** dead, **you're** dead. Don't be stupid, and go with your gut."

Piper got into the Shroud, stowing her new katanas beneath her seat. She sat across from Nero, who was concentrating on reading something off of his Blackbox as they left the ground.

When they leveled out and became cloaked, Nero stowed his Blackbox in a pocket. "Well, Miss Donlin, how do you like guard duty?" he asked with a smile, "Is my life sufficiently boring enough for you?"

"Let's just say that I hope this trip is as uneventful as the past few days. Doesn't it get awkward for you?" Piper asked, "Having me follow you around?"

He sighed. "It is about to get a bit more awkward for the both of us."

"What do you mean, Docâ€¦Max?"

"You accompany me anywhere and everywhere. That includes public restrooms."

"Simple. I canvas the place before you go in and I guard the door with my life."

They sat in silence for a few moments, studying each other. Piper finally broke it, asking, "Max? Can I tell you something?" She pulled one of her curls straight and let it bounce back.

His expression softened, became more human. "Of course. Anything. I'll listen."

"Max, when I was running from London, my supervisor was shot. As she was bleeding out on the floor of her office, she told me to run, and not to stop until I met the Emperor of Rome. Running through the countryside, that's what I had to think about. One night while I was lying in a haystack in the south of England, I realized what it meant. I **had** to find you, and stop at **nothing** to do it, since

you held whatever I was supposed to find."

"Piper, I do not really have much of an answer, but," he paused, pulling something on a chain out from under his collar, "here. This is for you."

He got up and fastened the chain around her neck. It held a small wreath of green metal olive branches, like those that ancient kings and emperors would wear.

"Thank you, Max." With a second or two of hesitation, she got up and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Max. You're the only one I've got now."

"Just don't lose it, dear. And remember the Emperor," he smiled as the Shroud began to descend upon the suburbs of Paris.

5. Paris

Nero stepped out of the Shroud after Piper had secured the area. They had landed a few city blocks away from the heart of Paris, and soon enough their plans were set.

As Nero and Piper fully entered the town, Nero was startled by how little everything had changed. Sure, the little coffee shops were going by different names now, and G.L.O.V.E.'s influence could be seen with a trained eye, but Paris was the same city as he had always remembered.

_Being ten years old was fun. Being a ten-year-old in Paris was even more fun, especially when you were allowed to gorge yourself on French food at your parents' expense. His parents were adamant about the whole "Europe tour" thing, dragging Max through countless museums and memorials, but he dragged __**them**__ into the shops. _

_ The summer day was going perfectly, and little Max was camped out on the Champ de Mars in the shadow of the iconic Eiffel Tower on a picnic blanket with his favorite treat, chocolate ice cream. His mother had started to unpack their lunch, and his father even returned with a balloon purchased from a roaming clown. _

_ Lunch was perfect, and there was not a cloud in the sky. The clown walked by again and stopped to say "Bonjour," but when it saw Max's parents, the clown's expression changed. The clown pulled out a gun and told them to stand up or he would kill the kid first. It smiled a sick, twisted smile. Yes, the clown confirmed, this was murder, and it was right in front of every tourist going up the tower. _

_ "Okay," his mother said, standing with her hands up. Her husband followed her lead and stood up, and Max followed his father's example. The clown took the safety off of his gun and asked for their last words. He asked Max's parents to renounce the agency that they worked for (Max didn't catch the name), but they firmly replied "No."

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_ "Very well then," the clown said, pointing the gun at their son. Max threw his ice cream, running headfirst into the clown and knocking him off balance long enough for the police to arrive. The clown was hauled away and put in prison for attempted murder. That

was just the first reason that Nero was not a big fan of the City of Light. _

"Max?" Piper asked, "Max, are you alright?"

He had half a mind to tell her no, that they should just leave, that they had to run, that the clown would come back, that Mummy and Daddy would ****not**** be okay, that the policemen wouldn't get to them in time, that the clown wasn't alone, that they were in danger, that Paris was bad, that he should have never agreed to ****meet**** in Paris in the first place—but Nero just shook his head and said, "I'm fine, Piper. Let's go. Watch out for the taxis, though."

_His next trip to Paris had gone even worse. Being a young G.L.O.V.E. operative, a target in Paris had been his first mission. This mission was one that ****nobody**** talked about anymore. No one dared to mention how badly it went, because the world's most feared supervillain would have their heads on golden platters as soon as the words left their mouths. _

_ The clown incident had been bad enough, but literally having to hold your guts together in front of the Louvre was no picnic either. That had required a lot of explanation and mountains of paperwork._

_ Nero would suffice to say that he hated Paris with a passion. None of his visits there had gone well, and he was not looking forward to this one either. No meeting with the G.L.O.V.E. ruling council was ever uneventful. There was always someone out looking for Nero, and Paris would be the perfect place to strike._

"Honestly, Max, are you okay?"

Piper's question shook him back to reality with a jarring force.
"What? I'm fine."

"You've barely said a word since we left the Shroud and you nearly got yourself run over. If you really ****are**** the world's greatest supervillain, be ****alert****! At least lend me a hand and pay attention!" Piper scolded as they rounded a corner to find the glass pyramids of the Louvre.

After jostling through the crowd, they found the information desk and Nero told the man behind it, "We are here for the Da Vinci exhibit in the West Wing." The man nodded and motioned for them to follow. They went through a few doors with pass codes, all of which Piper committed to memory. The man finally led them to a plain, metal elevator.

As the doors opened, Nero told Piper, "Here is where I must leave you. The council will not allow you any further unless you become a member. Goodbye, Piper, and remember the Emperor."

"Max," she said as he stepped into the elevator, "remember the plan."

He nodded solemnly. "Au revoir, mademoiselle."

As Piper ducked into a museum bathroom to don her new identity, three figures took up positions outside. They pulled out some advanced

tracking equipment and began to home in on her location.

6. The Ultimate Diversion

Raven paced the room with a passion. She had been watching the red dot of Piper's Blackbox, and it had been moving around the museum according to plan. Nero was still in the meeting; nothing going on there. The surrounding area looked clear, at least from the images that the satellites could pick up. The operation in Paris was going surprisingly well, but Raven could not shake the feeling of concern that had been nagging her all day. If she knew one thing, an assassin's concern meant that something was wrong, and she did not like not knowing what it was.

****H.I.V.E. Hallways****

Wing and Otto were headed for the tactical training area when they ran into Laura and Shelby. Laura was looking mildly concerned.

"Guys, Nero's gone and Raven is still here," Shelby told them, "Watch out for Raven. I think he took Piper on a mission and not her, so she's ****pretty**** ticked off now."

"Thank you for the warning. I am supposed to be meeting her soon," Wing gulped, just as Raven turned the corner. "Hello, Raven," he smiled as she strode over.

"Fanchu, you have some training exercises to get done," she stated as her Blackbox began to beep. Piper. She accepted the incoming call.

"Raven, I thought I should let you know that the meeting is nearly over. Nero just sent a message that he should be out in around ten, fifteen minutes. We'll be exiting the museum in about twenty. I've canvassed the area, and it all seems safe. Everything is going according to plan here. How are things at H.I.V.E.?" Piper asked.

"Fine. The only disturbance has been Block and Tackle, gathering up another round of detentions with Ms. Leon, almost as usual. I am glad to hear that the plan is going well, but be careful and do not lose focus," Raven instructed. Otto, Wing, Shelby, and Laura just stood there listening. "I will say, though, that I am glad that I am not the one who has to dress up. Playing those parts can be left to you."

Otto immediately hacked into Raven's Blackbox telecommunication and got the picture. Piper appeared to be wearing makeup â€" the fire engine red lipstick spoke for itself. She also appeared to be wearing a dress that matched. Later on, Otto would share the image with the group.

"Yes, well, I do what I have to," Piper said, "I'm sure you would rather not have been disguised in plain sight, ****especially ****not in a dress."

"It is a crafty plan, definitely for our advantage. You will catch enemy operatives off guard like that. It is something I never would

have done, and they will be convinced that you are me."

"You would still be just as formidable, but it wouldn't suit you. Good luck with Block and Tackle. Some people are starting to give me strange looks."

"_Dasvidonya_, Piper. Stay safe," Raven told her.

"_Dasvidonya_." Piper signed off.

****The Louvre, Paris, France****

Piper was strolling around the exhibits by the information desk when her Blackbox beeped with a message: _In the elevator._ She headed towards the desk, pretending to be asking a question about the wait time to see the Mona Lisa. "The West Wing," she whispered to the guard, who again led her to the elevator.

Soon enough, the elevator doors slid open, and Nero walked out accompanied by two other men. One of them looked like a bear, and the other looked like he had spent every day of his life in the sun.

"Ah, Maximilian, I deed not know vat you had an _escort_. Vonderful thinking, especially in Parees, with the hotels, no?" the bear said in a thick accent, elbowing Max. Clearly his first language was not English. It sounded more Eastern European.

Piper gave him a glare cold enough to freeze the Devil's blood.

"Not an _escort_," Nero said icily, "merely a bodyguard."

"Oh, yes, vat is vhat they **all **say," laughed the bear.

"Come on, Max. Let's go," Piper said as they walked out of the back rooms of the Louvre. They were almost behind schedule because of this lecherous bear.

Thankfully, the group split up as they left the museum. Soon enough, Max and Piper were walking on a bridge across the Seine, heading towards the Eiffel Tower. They slowed down to pretend to look at things in the shop windows. Every so often, one of them would feign interest and point at something in the displays, and they would stop for a few seconds to ogle over it.

When they reached Gustave Eiffel Avenue, Piper whispered, "Max, we're being followed by three agents, all men. They were on our tail before we made that last turn, but I'm pretty sure that we are the ones they want."

"Let's get near the Tower, so there will be a crowd. They will think twice about attacking us there, and we can call over the Shroud on autopilot." He hoped that their pursuers were more considerate than the clown had beenâ€|

When they reached the green in front of the Tower, Piper grabbed his hand without hesitation. "Play along," she hissed as their assailants got within earshot.

"Max, darling, eet has been too long seence I have seen you," she

said in a flawless French dialect. "Eet has been ****much**** too long."

"Isabelle, it ****has**** been!" Nero gave her a hug, "Why do you not come and study closer to me?"

"But Max, the Sorbonne has geeven me a full scholarsheep. Eet ees too good for me to pass up. You should be glad, my dear," Piper smiled somewhat sadly. The men approaching them were now within ten feet and they seemed to be readying their weapons.

"Play along. I'm sorry," _ Piper said mentally. Nero gave her a puzzled look as she mentally confirmed, _"Yes, I can speak to you like this." _

Their pursuers were within five feet when Piper gave them the ultimate distraction: she moved forward and kissed Nero full on.

7. Deer in the Headlights

Nero froze in shock as Raven almost simultaneously cursed in Russian miles and miles away. She had been monitoring the mission from various cameras and did not expect this to happen, not now, not ever. Nero was ten years older than her, so he must have been thirteen or so when Piper was ****born****. Ewwwâ€|

Nero still looked like a deer caught in the headlights of an avid hunter's truck when the men approached.

"Max, Natalya, how good it is to see you," the first one said with a malicious grin.

"Who ees zees Natalya?" Piper asked, not forgetting to sound French, "Max, 'ave you beenâ€|"

"She isn't Natalya," the second said, "Looks like you have some social life after all, Nero."

****Who ees zees Natalya****, Max? She ees not some offeece girl, ees she? ****Max, what 'ave you done?!****" Piper almost wailed.

"Ma'am, I am so sorry that you have been caught in the middle of this," explained the third attacker, "but this man is an international terrorist. Everything you know about him is almost surely a lie."

Piper turned to Nero, crocodile tears streaming down her cheeks now. "You want space, you come back. You leave me, you love me. ****Who are you?**** Is your name even Max? What 'ave you done?! I hate you!" she sobbed, mixing her words into one fluid torrent of grief and hate.

She threw his hand down (Nero ad just noticed that they were holding hands, looking more like the love-struck couples of Paris than before) and went right up to their attackers, brimming with fake gratitude towards them.

"You, how can I ever sank you? You 'ave been too kind. I ****never****

would 'ave found out eefâ€| " she grabbed one of the men into a hug, and when she let go, he crumpled to the ground like a paper doll.

"Mon Dieu! 'As 'e 'ad enough water today? Monsieur, ees 'e alright?" Piper feigned interest and concern as the other two men bent down to check their colleague's pulse.

One of them opened his mouth to reply, but he did not see Piper when he looked up. Instead he saw the purple flash of her twin blades, and soon his blood pooled with the blood of his companions. As the last one of them choked on his own plasma, he croaked, "Raven. Youâ€|Ravenâ€|all along." His face went ashen gray, and the light fell from within his eyes.

Piper turned to Nero as something began beeping. "Oh no," she mouthed, "Dive!" She practically tackled him as the explosion went off, knocking him onto the grass. One of the men had been carrying a bomb, definitely for use on either them or the Shroud. Things were worse than she had feared if these men wanted to bring them in dead.

The air smelled like ash and soot as Piper pulled Nero up and a crowd began taking pictures of what they assumed was the filming of the next great action movie. "Max, are you alright?" he simply nodded, dusting off his immaculately tailored suit.

"Max, **let's go**." Nero still had that deer-in-the-headlights look, but he followed her wordlessly. They met up with the Shroud on the Rue du Bac, and they climbed aboard before the local police could give chase.

As soon as they were onboard, Piper went to put on her normal assassin clothes while a dumbfounded Nero pulled out his Blackbox, which was almost overloaded with messages from Raven. **Raven**. She had been monitoring their whole mission! He would have a lot of explaining to do when they got back.

****H.I.V.E.****

"Maximilian Nero, **what was that**?" Raven questioned as Nero floundered like a fish out of water. He could not find any words at all to justify what had just happened in front of the Tower. "I would risk sounding like your mother, but **what were you thinking**?" she almost yelled.

"I umâ€| Iâ€| sheâ€| we neverâ€| I swear we didn'tâ€|"

"Enough," Raven cut him off, "But you had better have some good answers when you get back here. **I will be waiting**." She terminated their conversation.

What was that girl thinking? She was a bodyguard, for goodness' sake! Piper was **never** meant to do that! It was a **serious** breach of protocol, and there would most likely have to be a meeting of all of the H.I.V.E. staff when Piper and Nero returned. Then the rumor mill would begin buzzing, and the whole school would get dragged in.

Raven was not looking forward to orchestrating that meeting. She was

not looking forward to Nero's face turning redder than his cravat, and she was definitely not looking forward to having to be the first one to address the crowd there. Why hadn't she just killed the girl when she caught her lurking around the school? Life would have been ****much**** simpler that way.

****The Shroud****

Piper walked out of the Shroud's bathroom in her assassin wear, fully equipped with all of her weapons. She took the seat across from Nero, her katana swords stowed underneath for the time being.

"Still in shock?" she asked with a kind expression.

"I don't know what to make of yourâ€¦diversion, Piper. We're going to have a serious meeting with the staff when we get back, courtesy of Raven. She seems none too pleased with your actions," Nero answered somewhat meekly.

"I'm sorry, Max. I honestly am. I only meant it as a distraction. I would understand if you think less highly of me in the future, though. Honestly, I'm so sorry," Piper apologized.

"Piper, it's fine," he assured her, "Truly. And I wouldn't say that it was totallyâ€¦unpleasant."

8. You are a Bodyguard (Chapter 7 & a half)

As soon as they hit the landing crater, Raven was aboard the Shroud holding Piper by the collar an inch off of the ground. Raven started hissing, "_What do you think you were doing? He is thirteen years older than you, and he is your ****boss****_, you little s-_"

"Raven! Put her down!" Nero admonished. Raven gave him a glare and slowly lowered Piper to the ground. "Now let go of her." Raven let her collar go, and Piper took a step closer to Nero, who moved closer to her almost protectively.

"Nero, we need to talk. This is a ****massive**** breach of protocol and the whole school will know about it soon. You know about the debriefing meetings that we all have after every G.L.O.V.E. meeting. How will you explain this to the school? How will you cover yourself up this time?"

"Raven, let's take this inside. We will meet in my office in one hour. The crew needs to get to the Shroud," Nero said as he walked down the landing ramp.

Piper was about to follow when Raven hissed, "_Listen, kid. You are a dead woman walking. If I ****ever**** catch you doing ****anything**** with him, I will eat your flesh for breakfast and wash it down with your blood. You are his bodyguard, not just a body. Got it?_"

"Yes. I'm not afraid of you," Piper looked her straight in the eye.

"Of course you aren't. As long as ****Nero**** is there, you'll be fine. You're his guardian angel now. But you'll soon need one yourself if

you two decide to take this any further."

9. The Debriefing Meeting

"Piper, my office. Now," a pink-in-the-face Nero commanded as they walked into the main building. "We need to talk before the meeting."

Piper followed wordlessly, her katanas strapped to her back but still glowing sharp. Nero did not make eye contact with her or anyone else in the hallways, even when they directly said, "Good evening, Doctor."

They went straight into Nero's office, and he activated the doors' state-of-the-art soundproofing mechanism. He sank into his desk chair, his head in his hands. 'I can't sit across this desk from you, like I'm your principal. I can't talk to you like a ****student****, Piper," he sighed.

They sat on a bench in front of the big bay window. From here, they had a view of almost all of the H.I.V.E. complex, bathed in the fiery golden light of the setting sun.

"Piper, what are we going to do about this?" Nero began, "How will we deal with whatever Raven decides to say at the debriefing meeting? What will we tell the school?!"

"We tell them the ****truth****, Max. Then we let them decide what they want to believe."

"Then the rumor mill will run wild," Nero sighed as he put an arm around her shoulders, "The students will find out from overhearing careless teachers. You know that it will happen."

"Then they find out. One way or another, it will happen. The question really is: What do we do about ****us****? Is there even an ****us****? Max?" she trailed off.

"I, um... Piper, you're wonderful and..."

"Max, you know I can read minds, don't you? Don't bother trying to put a jumble of thoughts into words if there are no words for it. I understand," Piper smiled.

"Then, simply, yes. There is an ****us****', at least until G.L.O.V.E. hears about this and calls for a formal hearing in front of the ruling council. Our staff here has no true say in this matter after all. Yes, Piper, there is an ****us****', at least for now," Nero said.

"Good," Piper replied, laying her head on his shoulder, "Now we just have to tell the school."

"Fun," Nero grimaced.

****Staff Debriefing Meeting (Conference Room 3)****

Raven stood up and clicked the projector on. Nero was at the head of the table with Piper on his right. She had taken Raven's symbolic

spot. Everyone was allowed to sit wherever they pleased, but Nero always got the head of the table. His assassin was always at his right hand. No one had ever questioned the unwritten rule of symbolic power, but now here was Piper, usurping her spot.

"As you all know, Piper got Dr. Nero out of Paris in one piece. Very commendable for a first mission. However, that is not what we are here to discuss. We will be taking leave of normal debriefing to address a breach in protocol. Around half an hour ago, a compilation of the footage from Paris was sent to all of your Blackboxes. How many of you received that and opened the file?" Raven scanned the room.

Every hand and paw in the conference room went up except for Nero's, who was starting to turn red again, and Piper's.

"This is a ****massive**** breach in protocol, which will most likely warrant a meeting of the ruling council itself. As you know, any and all council member relationships must be ****directly**** cleared through Number One in advance. This was in your introduction manuals, which ****I am sure ****you all read. As the information provided speaks for itself, I would now like to open the floor for questions," Raven sat down, the frozen CCTV camera frame still displayed on the overhead projector.

Ms. Leon raised a paw and asked, "Nero, this is wonderful for you, but is it really going to be the '_two of you_'? Have you reached a decision yet?"

Nero was fully red now as he tried to explain, "Iâ€|weâ€|um, Piper and Iâ€|yes."

Piper held his freezing cold hand under the table as she said, "What I think Max is trying to say is that there is an '_us_', at least until Number One decides."

"And if the council disapproves?" asked Professor Pike, looking down from the far end of the table, "What will you do then?"

"Then we will choose the only safe option: stop."

"What about the students? What example is this setting?" Tennenbaum took her turn to ask.

"As of now, they do not know. Hugs only in public, no true PDA's," Piper looked her straight in the eye, "and I'm sure they won't mind if we hold hands under the table."

As soon as the words left her mouth, almost the whole group ducked their heads under the table. Seizing the moment when no one was looking, Raven mouthed at Piper, "This is one thing, but if I ****ever**** walk into a room that I have permission to be in and catch the two of you doing anything, you will be very, very dead."

10. And Now GLOVE Knows

"Otto, don't!" Shelby tried to pull him back into the accommodation blocks, "What would you do if your personal life was on display for

the world?"

"Otto, this is unwise," Wing warned.

"You're going to be hurting the two people who have** every **power to put you in detention for the rest of your time at H.I.V.E.," Laura warned.

"The whole school will find out soon enough anyway. Besides, I could get extra points for my stealth and tactical evasion of Raven," Otto snickered as he walked down the hall, "I can miss curfew once in a while, and this will be worth it."

"Your funeral," Wing said with a shrug, walking back into the block.

Piper and Nero were occupying the bench in front of the window wall in Nero's office, each holding a cup of coffee.

"Max, didn't it ever get lonely running the school by yourself?" Piper gazed up at him as he purposefully avoided her stare by looking out of the window.

"Sometimes, but rarely. In between the running and fearing for my life, paperwork, meetings, and recuperation, I guess it did. But then someone would always decide to drop another bombshell."

Nigel Darkdoom was talking to his father through his Blackbox when the school-wide announcement system came on. It was considerably late for the announcements to come on, but there could always be a lockdown taking place.

"Good evening. This is your headmaster speaking."

Diabolus started to say good night when the tapes from Nero's office began to play over the loudspeaker system.

"The question really is: What do we do about _**us**_?" Piper's voice began to play. Soon enough, the whole school knew about the escapades of Dr. Nero. And so did a member of the G.L.O.V.E. ruling council.

"What theâ€¦" Piper and Nero started to say. The synthesized voice had been one they recognized trying to pass as Dr. Nero, but the tapes were real. Malpense.

Piper and Nero bolted for the audio room. Piper wrenched the door off of its hinges, but the room was empty, save for a CD that was broadcasting their personal lives all over the school.

Piper pulled out the CD and neatly snapped it in half as Nero turned on the PA system and addressed the school.

"Hello everyone. This is the **actual** Dr. Nero speaking. Whoever is responsible for this recording will be found and will serve his time justly. Believe me when I say that we already have some suspicions as to who this was, and he will **not** be happy sitting in my office after breakfast tomorrow morning. Good night," Nero deftly turned off the system.

He turned to Piper and shook his head. Just as they were returning to his office with their hands entwined, Nero's Blackbox began to beep.

11. Coffee

****Warning:** Be a bit mature here, people! This is a WARNING!******

Between dealing with Diabolus and his own staff, Nero got a little shy of three hours' worth of sleep that night. An "emergency" meeting of the ruling council was posted for five or six days later, most likely in Barcelona, Spain.

Nero sat at his desk, halfway lost in thought. Piper walked in and immediately felt bad for him â€" the stress, sheer masses of paperwork, lack of sleep, and general embarrassment were taking their toll.

Piper gave him a hug and asked, "Are you okay, Max? Do you want some coffee before I haul Malpense up here?"

"That would be nice," he sighed.

"Alright. How do you like it?" Piper inquired innocently.

Nero gave her a sly grin, "_**Hot**_."

"Oh, Max" she laughed, "then it looks like you won't be getting any coffee for the time being."

She came back a few minutes later with two cups of coffee. She sat the first in front of Nero, "cream, no sugar." He nodded as she pecked his cheekâ€|just as Raven dragged Otto into the office.

"**Ick**," Raven made a sound like a cat hacking up a fur ball as she deposited Otto in a chair and took her leave. Piper pulled up her chair next to Nero.

"So, Mister Malpense, would you care to explain ****why**** you were taping things in my private office?" Neo had kicked into domineering headmaster mode. He appeared confident and composed, but a quick sweep of his mind showed Piper that he was anything but.

"Well, Sir, Raven made a bit of a scene screaming incoherently while you were in Paris, and I got curious," Otto replied nonchalantly.

"Why did you then choose to play these tapes over the loudspeakers? What in the name of Number One himself were you thinking?"

"Sir, there are no ****real**** secrets at this school. We as students have certain rights to information too, you know," he said smugly.

"Be that as it may, Malpense, but you still have detention every evening after dinner for the next two months. This had ****better**** be the last of your escapades for a long time, young man, or the

punishments will soon become much worse. It'll be the brig next time."

"Sir, if I may, I have a suggestion. I think ****Piper**** would rather have detention with you every day for the next two months."

"Mister Malpense, it would be wise of you to ****hold your tongue****," Nero warned, "Now, Piper, what are we going to do?"

"I ****really**** have to outline this for you two?" Otto asked. To their puzzled looks, he continued, "Step one, get a private room, preferably Nero's. Step two, find some candles, but don't light the place on fire. Step three, Nero, here's where you lose the suit. Step--"

"Malpense! Get out of my sight!" Nero's temper flared.

"Sir, you should probably know this just in caseâ€|"

"I very well ****do ****know, Malpense! GET OUT!"

Otto stood up to leave as Piper consoled, "Max, don't listen to him and his insolence. It's part of being a teenager."

"There are ****laws**** against this, Nero. If you really are thirteen years older than herâ€|"

"This is my island. I am the dictator. ****My word IS law****," Nero growled, "Now get out."

Otto left wordlessly, but Piper could have sworn that as he crossed the threshold, he was muttering something about coffee and locked doors. "Max," Piper said, "don't listen to him. What does he know?"

"Piper, is it weird, me being thirteen years older than you? I mean, I could drive when you were three, and I graduated when you started kindergartenâ€|"

"Max, no," she hugged him, "It's fine. Don't worry about it. I mean it."

"I don't know how to answer that," Nero kissed her cheek.

"How about 'we'll see what happens in Barcelona'?" Piper smiled.

12. Barcelona

Piper and Nero got off of the Shroud in the middle of bustling Barcelona. They weaved their way through torrents of traffic and entered a nondescript building with a sign that proclaimed it would be under renovation for the next few months. Nero was quite pale by the time they reached six or seven flights of stairs below ground level. They stopped before a thick metal door. Piper took his hand and said, "Max, remember, you are an emperor. You have nothing to fear but fear itself. Besides, I'll be right next to you. Don't be afraid of a vote."

Without another word, they went into the subterranean conference room. Piper and Nero were greeted by the stern faces of the ruling council and the distorted image of Number One himself. They took their seats as Number One said, "The meeting is now officially called to order. The matter of Doctor Maximilian Nero and Miss Piper Donlin is now brought to the table. Any objections to such permission are to be spoken now."

Madame Mortis took her turn to speak first, "Max, this is very nice for you, but what would happen if she were to have a child?"

"I will not," Piper said, "How can I guarantee you this? I, well, you will just have to trust me, Madame." Piper reached for Nero's hand under the table, "You will just have to trust us."

"Max, she is a little ****young**** for you, yes? If age is just a number, then jail is just a room," Chavez spoke up.

"Councilman Chavez, with all due respect, both Max and I do not hold any official citizenship, and as you can probably tell, I have a mind ****far**** beyond my years," Piper said smartly, her voice laden with poisonous threats that went unspoken.

The room was silent, and Number One asked, "Any more questions? No? Then we will bring this to vote. Think of all of the reports on the both of them that I have sent each of you, and of what you have heard this evening. Now, would all who are in favor of allowing Dr. Nero and Miss Donlin to continue their relationship please raise your right hands."

The tension in the room was so thick that you could slice it with one of Piper's glowing katana swords. Slowly but surely, a few people started raising their hands. The bear. Mortis. Chavez. Darkdoom (Nero smiled at that; he knew his friend wouldn't vote to make him unhappy). Piper scanned the room. ****Every right hand was in the air.****

"Very well, motion approved," Number One said, "Do unto others."

"Do unto others," the assembly raised their hands and Number One signed off, leaving the screen black.

Piper nearly hugged Nero to death as the assembly began to clap. "Thank you," she smiled as they all got up, some of them leaving quickly, but a large remainder staying in the board room. "Thank you all so much."

"Nero, you know what we need to do?" a nondescript man in a suit (named Wright, Nero said) asked, directing his question mainly to the remainder of the group. "We need to have a party. This is ****Barcelona****, people! There are plenty of places to go."

They all hopped into a tour bus-like vehicle and headed off for some sort of club that someone had mentioned. They tipped the driver heavily and filed in, paying at the door as Spanish music blared from the room.

"This place is clear! I sent someone to check it out while we were driving over!" Chavez yelled over the currently blasting song.

It was very early in the morning when the group left, all heading for different locations around the town. Piper and Nero were exhausted by this point. They walked through the buzzing streets of Barcelona looking tired, and Piper turned to say something to Nero. "Max, what did we drink?" "

"Piper, are you feeling okay? I think whatever drinks they gave us weren't a hundred percent non-alcoholic," Nero said.

13. What (Chapter 11 and a half)

****Warning! More mature people only! Maturity warning!****

When Piper woke up, she did not open her eyes right away. Better to let them think she was still asleep, because she ****knew**** she was not in her own bed. Someone was breathing very close to her, and she could smell cologne. Something moved- someone had an arm wrapped around her. Piper was curled up against someone who smelled like familiar cologneâ€|Max. Oh G-dâ€|

She opened her eyes, and she was right. She was curled up against Nero, who wasn't wearing a shirtâ€|oh G-d. However, he still had the body of a field agent, butâ€|oh G-d! What had she â€" they â€" done?!

Nero opened his eyes and smiled. "'Morning, beautiful."

"Max!" Piper gasped.

"Oh G-d," was his reply, "Where are we?"

14. Explanations

"Maxâ€|" Piper noticed her black jumpsuit was still on and a wave of relief washed through her. "How did we end up here? And ****where**** is your shirt?"

"We were hit with needles just after you and I left that place. Someone was after us, and they apparently dragged us in here after we were drugged. I woke up around then, but it was all still pretty hazy. They threw us in this metal box, and you mumbled something about being exhausted. They gave us a stack of straw and one blanket, so you ended up throwing your jacket over the straw."

"What about the shirt, Max? When'd you end up losing that?" she subconsciously snuggled closer to Nero.

"You said something about pillows, so I folded some out of what I had. You've got my jacket, and I've got the shirt. We only had one blanket, so we kind of ****had**** to share."

"Max, always the gentleman, aren't you?" She gave him a hug, "And one with the physique of an agent, even though you haven't been out on the field in a long time."

"Well, thank you," he smiled a smile that only he could.

"Max, what happened to you?" Piper asked, her voice full of concern

as she traced the long scar that ran diagonally down his stomach.

"I was in Paris on my first mission ever, and it went ****badly**** wrong. We were a team of three, straight out of G.L.O.V.E. training, and we were sent to get some documents from the library there, the Biblio-something-or-other. We had no clue that there were any other agents in town, and they attacked us. It was the French Elite Forces or something. I didn't pay much attention, but they chased us out right in front of the Eiffel Tower. We were outnumbered by at least two to one, and they were gaining on us pretty quickly. I caught a knife before it hit one of my friends, but then when I turned around," Nero grimaced at this point, "this blonde girl put her knife through my stomach. Of course, she didn't just stab me; she had to pull this knife down my stomach. So I ended up firing at these agents, clutching my stomach and watching my shirt turn red. Then I looked down and practically saw a vivisection. By the time our team had shot or stabbed all of the Elite Forces, I was starting to see that black tunnel you get before you pass out. I saw the Eiffel Tower one more time and then woke up coming out of surgery. The scar just never went away."

"Max," she said, giving him a fierce hug and inhaling more of the familiar cologne, "it's a miracle that you're alive."

"Piper, keep me alive," he hugged her back. Her hair smelled like strawberries. "Piper, let's ****try**** and stay alive."

15. Supervillains are not Cuddly

"Max, I really don't want to get up, but how are we going to get out of here?" Piper asked, "I don't have my katana swords. The guards must have taken them. They would have gotten us out of here easily. I've failed, Max. You aren't safe anymore. ****I've failed.****"

"No you haven't. I'm not hurt, am I? There is always a plan B," Nero smiled and pulled his Blackbox from a pocket, "They missed it."

"Raven is going to fillet us alive," Piper said, "especially if you tell her that we woke up like this."

"We'd be out of ****here****," Nero said, powering up his Blackbox, "I won't let her kill you."

Raven answered and she immediately asked, "Maximilian Nero, ****where have you been****?! You were supposed to call after the meeting! Where are you? Where is your shirt? You had better not be in some hotel, or you'll be sorry when I get there to haul you out of Europe for good."

"Raven, it's a very long story that we should save for the ride back."

"We? Don't tell me she's there with youâ€¦|Max, what have you done?" Raven glowered.

"Raven, calm down. Yes she is, but no, it isn't what you're thinking. We're in a prison. We were drugged on our way back from the meeting," Nero omitted the party, "and we were hauled here. I don't know

****who**** we are dealing with, but they took away Piper's katanas, and they were our only surefire way out. How long do you think you'll be if you can track these coordinates?"

"I have a Shroud prepping for launch now. Three and a half, four hours tops. Three and a quarter if I can make it off of the ground soon. By the way, you've been out for a while. It's nearly eight at night where I've pinpointed you." Raven signed off and ran toward the launching crater.

Nero put his shirt and jacket back on, and Piper pulled her jacket on too, noticing how cold the cell was. Of course. It was entirely metal, and they were quite possibly in an underground complex. At least, there were no windows.

Nero moved the mattress into the corner furthest from the door, and they sat there together, sharing the blanket and wearing it as a shawl. Piper held his hand: they were both freezing, and appreciated any extra warmth. "Max, why are you closer to the door? Aren't I supposed to be guarding you?"

"I feel better this way, knowing that they'll have to get through me first. I know it's stupid, but oh well. Strength comes before stealth now, depending on whose got us cooped up here," Nero told her.

"Oh, Max," Piper sighed, putting her head on his shoulder, "You've still got some of the brain of a field agent too. How lucky am I?"

"Very," he kissed her forehead.

"Max, did they come in here at all when I was knocked out?" Piper asked from his shoulder.

"No. I still have no idea who they actually are or why we're here," Nero sighed, "but Raven'll have us out of here in a couple of hours."

"This'll warrant a ****heck**** of a debriefing, between the kidnapping and the way we woke up. Raven will have a field day with that."

"Don't worry, I'll have it hushed up somehow. You seem to be underestimating my influence on people."

"Thanks, Max. You wanna know something? You're quite cuddly for a supervillain," Piper smiled.

"Piper, I am ****not**** cuddly! Attractive, maybe. Desirable, maybe. Dangerous, obviously. But supervillains are ****not**** cuddly." Nero was slightly miffed by now.

"That's what you think, Max," Piper snuggled up to him.

"Oh, fine," Nero sighed, "For you, yes, but I'll have to hurt you if you say that in front of anyone else. Supervillains are notâ€|generically cuddly."

"But I might like that," she laughed, "Sorry. That was a bit crude."

"How do you like your coffee?" Neo asked, and they erupted into peals of laughter.

"Hot, very hot," Piper laughed, "Boiling."

"I'd have to say ****piping**** hot," Nero smiled.

****The Shroud****

Raven was aboard the Shroud, homing in on Nero's location. ****Of course**** she was called in to help; Nero's little angel had caused enough trouble already, and now she was being dragged in to fish them out. She had screwed it up ****massively****, even worse than the last time. Oh, how would Raven get through the debriefing meeting? What would she tell the staff? How could she allow those words to leave her mouth â€" that Nero and Piper had actuallyâ€|

Oh, the suspicion would be high even if they hadn't, and people would be asking if Nero had ever had an affair ****with Raven****. Ick. He was nice enough, but she greatly preferred that he would keep the suit ****on****. How would she tell the staff how serious Nero and Piper ****actually**** were? How would she be able to face them when she reached the coordinates? She would have to knock on every door from now on.

How could she ever look at Nero the same way again?

16. Escape

Three hours later, Piper had fallen asleep on Nero's shoulder, but he was watching the door with intent, halfway praying that Raven would come bursting through any minute.

It was oddly silent when the doors slid open and a tall, burly man walked through. He was still silent as he made his way towards them. Nero stood up, going into cold-blooded protective mode. "Which one of us do you want?" he asked venomously. Piper opened her eyes when Nero stood up, her fragile, comforting world shattering when she saw the man's face.

"Her. She knows too much," the burly man said with a malicious grin, "and I'm sure she's told you everything, the little rat."

Nero took a step forward, his features looking chiseled in the harsh light. ****Over my cold, dead body****."

"Max," Piper's voice was tense, "he'll kill you."

"I will, and I'll have no regrets. I'll snap your neck like a toothpick, fairy princess," the man said to Nero.

"As I said, you'll get her ****over**** ****my**** ****dead body****. I know what agents like you do to their prisoners before you shoot them," Nero gave him a glare that would turn even a battle-hardened soldier to a bowl of jelly, "and it's ****despicable****."

"_Max_," Piper warned, "This man murdered his wife and children in cold blood. He was after me from the start, ever since I learned

about Overlord. He isn't lying. Stop it, Max. It isn't worth it," Piper stood up and walked to Nero's side.

"Piper, he's going to murder you. He's going to do-"

"Max, I know, but this ****must**** be done. Goodbye," she kissed his cheek and walked over to the other man, who proceeded to slap Nero in the face.

"Thank you, good Sir. May I have another to match?" Nero asked.

"Sarcastic to the last," the man spit. Piper smiled as she was escorted out of the door.

"NO!" Nero wailed, clawing at the door helplessly, "Piper, no! Run!" He rammed his shoulder into the door with all of the strength of the field agent he once was—the same shoulder that Piper had laid her head on, almost in another lifetime. His jacket still smelled like her, like strawberries—"Piper, why?" He shouted at the door, "****IF YOU MOSTERS ARE DOING ANYTHING TO HER, I'LL HAVE YOUR BODIES FOR BREAKFAST! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME! PIPER, RUN! YOU'VE DONE YOUR JOB** —" I'M A DEAD MANY ANYWAY! SAVE YOURSELF! ****"**

He collapsed into a heap on the cold metal floor. Strawberries—_oh, Piper, why didn't I just rush that man? What horrible things is he doing to you?_

Nero swore that he could hear here in his head. _Max, I'm fine._

"Get out! You monsters, why?!" he yelled.

A sickening crunch and a bone chilling scream came permeating through the walls in response. "Piper, no!" Nero put his hands over his ears as the screams continued to shake the compound. Nero was more alone than he had ever been in his life. Piper was gone, likely being assaulted by some maniac, and he could do nothing. _Piper, I'm sorry. I was supposed to protect you. HIVE was supposed to protect you. _The next shriek almost reduced the world's most devious supervillain to tears.

Silence. There was absolute silence. The man had slit her throat, put her out of her misery—

A glowing purple katana blade appeared and carved a hole in the solid steel door. The metal fell away, and Piper pulled Nero up off the ground. He kissed her without hesitation.

"Piper, I thought—"

"Let's go. The cavalry's here," she said as Raven crossed the threshold, sticking out her tongue and making a sound like a cat hacking up a fur ball.

17. Nina

Onboard the Shroud, Raven began peppering them with questions. She relaxed when she heard the full story. So it wasn't ****entirely****

Piper's fault, but this Wright character would soon have a date with death. However, it would still warrant a terrible debriefing meeting.

Raven left them and went to inform the captain that they had to descend short of HIVE; they had someone else planning to come onboard.

Piper and Nero woke up with pounding headaches as they landed at a nondescript airstrip in the middle of the countryside. Raven got off the Shroud quickly as someone outside began to refuel the airship. Soon enough, she returned with a girl who looked about Piper's age.

The resemblance stopped there. This girl was in the battle gear of the SSK, and her straight, dark hair was swept into a ponytail with the ends dyed blue. Her eyes were brown and piercing, looking as if a single glance could kill.

"Piper, Dr. Nero," she acknowledged them with a nod. She stuck out her hand formally, "I'm Nina, and I'm your guard. You see, you lack a formal head of your sea patrol and you need someone to manage the sharks. Raven brought me on the team. Of course, I know ****all**** about you. Headmaster Nero and his ****rather young**** guardian angel, am I wrong? Or do I refer to you as 'Sir'?"

"Nero, Miss," he eyed her warily, "And what made you eligible for the SSK?"

"Let's say I have a knack for trouble and a great dislike for authority and its figures. I'm nearly as good at martial arts as I can be. I got my first black belt at age seven, and I can throw knives with lethal accuracy," Nina told him, "I've heard all about you and your angel there. Supposedly she's only a bit older than I am. That's ****not**** very appropriate, Nero. Even for a supervillain, I'm surprised."

"That's your problem******. Everyone's problem******! People see us only as numbers, not as human beings who are capable of love or reason. You, the SSK, HIVE in some cases, put some of their best agents out at sixteen. You think I can't control myself with ****him**** but I can fly around with a loaded arsenal? I can die for you, for HIVE, I can get brutally slaughtered, and yet I'm not allowed to love who I want? By your standards, I could have been risking my neck for nearly a year and a half by now," Piper said, "Explain how I'm allowed **â€** encouraged **â€** to go out and die, but not to love who I want!"

"It isn't**â€******natural****. Try explaining to a kid how Mum and Dad are thirteen years apart," Nina replied as they took off.

"Children, we have five hours until we get back, six if we are forced to go through this storm we're detouring from. You had ****better**** get along, or I will take measures into my own hands, and no one wants that. Get some sleep **â€** there are pillows in the overhead compartments- since we will be back in time for breakfast," Raven instructed, "and Max, Piper, you'll be asleep for the next day or so, according to Dr. Scott. He says whatever they hit you with had massive doses of tranquilizers designed to keep you nearly sedated for a few days. Caffeine won't help, so you'll be stuck napping all day. When we get back, Nina and I will take care of the debriefing

meeting. Just wash all of the prison cell dirt off and go to sleep."

"Yeah, sure, they'll get some decent _sleep_," Nina muttered, throwing pillows at Nero and Piper from the overhead compartment. She tipped her chair back and dimmed the lights to half power. Piper leaned her head on Nero's shoulder as he put an arm around her. As Piper snuggled up to him, Nina had to comment, "Ah, falling asleep in the arms of someone who has the power and the means to kill youâ€¦|true love for sure."

"Good night, my field agent," Piper smiled, ignoring Nina.

"Good night, my angel," Nero was finally able to relax â€" he and Piper were safe, and they were on their way home.

"Ick," muttered Nina, as she drifted off to sleep across from them.

"Get up," Raven ordered, flicking on the lights as they awoke groggily, "we're home." They had made it into the crater without incident, although it was pouring down rain and lightning split the sky.

Raven and Nina dropped Nero and Piper off at their quarters and went to find a room for the debriefing meeting. "Raven, I'm on your side of this. Thirteen years is ****way**** too much," Nina said as they rounded the corner into the main hallway.

18. Animus

Piper pulled herself up out of bed just in time for dinner. She tied her hair up, even though the dark mass of curls wouldn't make any difference to her dining companions.

She wandered out of her room and into the main portion of Nero's private quarters. The one bonus of being a bodyguard was having a room in here, and therefore having access to his library and all else that was there.

Someone from his staff had stoked the fireplace, and Raven and Nina were taking up two of the seats at the small table by a window, casually chatting. Here too they had a view of the entire school complex. Someone had brought up dinner, even though the regular meal was still going on down in the dining hall.

"We figured you'd just want to eat here," Nina explained, "the blood samples Dr. Scott took read that you've had an amazing amount of sedatives pumped into your blood streams, and you'll be drowsy for the remainder of today and tomorrow. You'll be ready to drop even after a simple meal."

Nero took the final chair, and Piper had to ask, "Really, Max? You put on a suit to eat dinner and then go back to sleep?"

"Hello to you too, Piper. Nina, Raven, how did the meeting go?" Nero inquired, wolfing down a forkful of spaghetti.

"The staff is glad that you got back safely," Raven said, "but

they'll miss you both while you recuperate."

Nina had a bit of a different answer, "Nero, I'm sure you and Piper would have rather enjoyed it. After all, '_debriefing_' is something she'd probably like to do to you once in a while. The staff's reaction was amazing. The explanation was either a letdown or a relief to them."

"You don't need to take it ****that ****far." Nero looked angry.

"Max, she's been like this ever since we met in the SSK," Piper assured him, "It's nothing to worry about."

"When will these affects wear off?" Nero yawned, trying desperately to change the subject.

"Soon," Nina said, "You two are holding hands again, aren't you?"

"None of your business," Piper stood up with a yawn that echoed Nero's, "I'm going back to sleep. I'll faint into my tea if I'm up for too much longer." She disappeared into her room, the one adjacent to Nero's.

Nina and Raven piled up all of the china and said goodnight to Nero. "We'll have lunch ready at noon, or perhaps half past, if you guys are awake enough. Or someone from the kitchens will bring it up if we have work to do," Raven walked out of the door.

Nina was about to follow when she turned around and asked Nero, who was about to go into his room, "Hey, Mister Field Agent, playing the field tonight?" She left with a snicker.

An hour later, there was a tap at Nero's door. "Come in, Piper," he said, and sure enough, it was her.

"Can't sleep?" He put his book down. When she faltered, he added, "What, you expected me to ****sleep**** in three-piece suits?" He wore some form of HIVE standard black pajama pants, but no shirt, the field agent!

"Can I talk to you, Max?" She sat down on the bed next to him.

"Of course, angel! What's wrong?"

"You trust me, right?"

"With my life."

"You love me, don't you?"

"Piper, ****of course**** I do! What would make you think otherwise?"

"Nothing," she replied, "You trust that I would do what was best for us, even if it meant that I had to hurt you for a minute or two, don't you?"

"Piper," he pulled her closer, "You haven't done anything wrong. You need some sleep; this is the medicine talking."

"**No**, Max," she looked at him tearfully, "Just answer the question."

"Of course I do. I love you," he pulled her into a passionate kiss like only he could. As their lips met, black tendrils of Animus fluid flowed from hers' to his'.

"Piper," Nero looked down as his skin became covered in the evil black hexagonal pattern and began to sting like needles, "what have you done?"

"**I'm sorry, Max**," she sobbed as the needles became butcher knives, "**I'm so sorry.**"

19. Strawberries

The "pattern of death" faded away in a few seconds, taking the pain away with it and leaving Nero covered in a sheen of sweat.

"You've been trying to kill me all along," he exclaimed, throwing off her hug and reaching for his Sleeper.

"Max, no!"

"I'll give you a minute to explain." The love in Nero's eyes was gone, replaced by burning rage, hate, and disbelief.

"Overlord is getting too strong, and is trying to invade humans, Max," Piper started to explain in a rush, "Pike created a serum to make you immune to the methods that Overlord is using, because _**once he gets you, all of HIVE will fall into the palm of his hand**_. You would never take the injections willingly, so he gave them to me. You wouldn't play with fate, Max. I **had** to pass it on to you. I did this to save you," his expression softened, "because Overlord is alive and gaining power. He'd use you up and spit you out, Max! Those men who captured us are working for him, and they tried to give me an injection of Animus fluid. I didn't know if they had gotten to you, and you had to get the vaccine before it was too late." After a pause, Piper added, "I'm done explaining, and a minute's up. You can kill me now."

"Piper, for some terrifying reason, I believe you." Nero put the Sleeper down on his bedside table and kissed her forehead. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go and wash all of this sweat off." He rose and walked in to what Piper supposed was the school's master bathroom. She heard the water running and resolved to see what he was reading. Hmm—a biography of Vlad the Impaler. What a lovely bedtime story.

Nero stared into the bathroom mirror. He had all that a supervillain could ever want, but somehow, Piper had made it all better. And he had almost killed her. _How lucky was he?_

"Very," a voice answered.

"Who—oh, Hello HIVEmind. What brings you here?" His mirror now displayed the blue outline of the school's AI.

"I am ****always**** here, Doctor. I am reminding you that those types of thoughts lead to those types of actions. Your facial expression upon entering the room was very revealing," the AI told him.

"Thank you for the reminder," Nero replied sarcastically.

"My sensors detect a hint of sarcasm, Doctor. Am I incorrect?"

Nero sighed, "No, HIVEmind. Please do not remind me. Everyone seems to think that it is their responsibility to do so. It seems that no one trusts my capacity to control myself."

"Reminder not set. I believe the expression here is '_to keep it in your_-'"

"That is enough, HIVEmind," Nero warned.

"I am sorry if I have overstepped my boundaries, Sir. I will not say that again. Goodnight, Sir."

"Goodnight." Nero flicked off the lights, returning to his room to find Piper engrossed in the book that he had left on the bed.

"How's HIVEmind?" she asked, holding up the book, "This doesn't seem like a very good bedtime story."

"Oh, himself as usual. That's more research for Villainy Studies on Monday morning. We're studying the life of Vlad. You're welcome to tag along if you want."

"Sounds interesting," said Piper, "But I prefer, 'There once was an evil king who met a beautiful girl, and they became the evil rulers of an evil land, and trained a group of their evil students to become evil themselves and take over neighboring lands.' I'd be glad to, Max, if only I didn't get any homework."

"I've heard that story before," he kissed her cheek as he sat down again, "but remind me of how it ends."

"Evilly ever after, of course, Max," she smiled, "I guess I should be saying goodnight."

"Stay here â€" there's another side to the bed," Nero said innocently.

"Max!"

"No, not like that!" he assured her, "Just stay here. Like we slept in jail, but a lot more comfortable."

"You are ****bad****, Maximilian Nero," she curled up with him, breathing in the familiar cologne, "but I'm sure I'd have you strung up by your hide if you tried anything without my permission."

"****Bad I am****." He pulled her closer. Her hair still smelled like strawberries. He loved strawberries. "Amazingly evil."

"I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't ****want ****to have to hurt you, Max."

"It's fine; you probably saved my life," he smiled, "You know, I love strawberries."

"Well, you know I love your cologne. It's just soâ€¦| _Nero_. Goodnight, my field agent."

"Goodnight, my angel," he gave her a kiss, a real kiss this time, leaving smiles on their weary faces as they fell asleep.

20. Omega Black Security Clearance

A loud banging on Nero's bedroom door jolted them both out of a peaceful sleep. The time was 10:21 in the morning, according to Nero's illuminated Blackbox.

"Max, are you alright? You didn't get up for breakfast, and Nina and I got concerned," Raven yelled through the door.

"I'm fine, Raven, just exhausted. Let me sleep. I'll try to be up by one," he smiled at Piper.

"What about Piper? Should we get her up?"

"You've made nearly enough noise to raise the dead, but if she's still asleep, leave her be. I'll get her up when I finally decide to roll out of bed." Piper was smiling by now too. Apparently Raven didn't know where her late-night wanderings had left her.

"Alright, Max. We'll let operations run as usual. Your Blackbox will go off at one if you aren't up already," Raven left Nero's quarters, slamming the blast-proof door as she left.

Piper shrugged, cuddling back up to Nero. As he put his arm back around her, he wondered, "_Is this what love is like to normal people?_"

Raven and Nina were monitoring school activities during a class change over the CCTV monitors in the main security room. Things usually went smoothly, but there were always troublemakers to be dealt with; this was HIVE, after all, and evil invited trouble. The deafening bell went off and hall patrols began sweeping the area as the corridors flooded. Instantly the halls were filled with chatter, four different colors of uniforms shoving past each other in an effort to be on time.

They switched over to Blackbox pinpoint monitoring; red dots were now visible wherever students were, silver dots were the staff, and gold dots were the "reigning four" â€" Nero, Raven, Piper, and Nina, the four people with Omega Black security clearance. However, top-level clearance only gave you so much information â€" only Nero knew it all, and sometimes things were kept from even him.

"Look what we have ****here****," Nina smiled mischievously as she looked at a monitor on the far side of the security room, "****instant blackmail****." Raven strode over curiously, and Nina showed her a steady time progression of two golden dots. One entered a room at a bit past ten the previous night. They stayed in the room right up to the last freeze-frame dot projection sweep, taken a few seconds before.

"Well, well, Doctor," Raven looked at the location labeled "_Nero's Quarters_", "Someone's going to have some explaining to do."

"Raven," Nina's expression was wicked, "should I switch to live projection?"

Raven put her finger onto the scanner system. "Status Raven Omega Black, clearance for camera zone zero-zero-zero-one live projection."

The camera feed came up, showing Nero and Piper lying there together. "Awâ€|how cute," Nina rolled her eyes, "So cute I could hurl. Nina Omega Black, requesting rewind feed from ten o'clock last night, steady speeded progression up until right now."

For the next twenty minutes, Raven and Nina went through the sped-up tapes. Nina was slightly let down that they were so innocent, but Raven changed her mind with the simple question: "You'd actually want to see that? Let alone know about that?"

"There you are," Nina said as an image of Raven knocking on Nero's door came up, "and now they're back asleep."

"Wait, where are they?" Raven asked as she froze the frame in a recording taken some fifteen minutes earlier, "They're gone. They were ****just**** on the feedâ€|"

Nina ran back the tapes in slow motion, and just as she began to play them, two people walked into the security room almost silently.

"Having fun with your new security clearance?" Raven and Nina spun around to see an angry Piper (and if that wasn't bad enough) hand-in-hand with the very last person they wanted to see: Nero.

21. This is HIVE, After All

****A.N.: THIS IS A GORE WARNINGâ€|THERE IS SOME BLOOD! THIS IS A WARNING!****

"Ah, Piper, doing much better with him than with Joseph, I take it?" Nina asked with an evil grin, the monitor behind her going dark.

Piper tensed, digging her fingernails into Nero's hand. "He's dead," she said flatly, "You made sure of that."

"Piperâ€|" Nero half inquired and half warned.

"You definitely made sure of that, or twenty stories of building did."

"It was an accident ****and you know it****," Nina was on her feet, "He got in my way. If your commanding officer orders you to move, you do so without asking why or telling her to wait. You ****never**** question your commanding officers." She was nearly in Piper's face by now.

"And he did. He deserved what he got, and so did you. You both tried to stop me, and there was no way on earth that I would have gotten dragged back to that lab."

"We thought you would die on that jump. Once I figured out what they did in those labs--"

"**That is no excuse**," Nina spat, "I was his commanding officer. Even though I wasn't yours, you still had to let me out."

"My office," Nero glowered, "Both of you. **Now**."

They trudged up to Nero's office, Nina leading the way grudgingly. Piper and Nero followed silently behind, and Raven brought up the back of the dreary parade. Nero took his customary seat behind the desk, but he made the other three sit across from him. The tension in the air weighed down on them all as Nero asked, "Nina, what are you talking about?"

"When we worked in the SSK, I was special. I was in one of their elite programs, and Piper was on the team that orchestrated it. The labs there experimented on us â€" on me - and I took advantage of the chance that I had to get free. We were on the roof of the London base. It's a good twenty stories or so in the air, and I made a break for it with a stolen grappler line. Her boyfriend â€" Joseph â€" got in the way, thinking I was crazy for abandoning the organization. I was his commanding officer, and I told him to get out of my way. He refused and asked for an explanation, since we were on the same team and had been working and training together for a while. I had no time to lose and didn't stop, but he told me to wait and grabbed onto the grappler line. Well, I shoved him out of the way, and he went over. Piper tried to dive after me, but I ended up throwing her off and right over the edge. Joseph died on impact, but Piper managed to slow down enough to survive," Nina explained, "Then she discovered what the labs really were, and she bolted."

"Piper," Nero looked sympathetic, "I never knew." His glance was met with a cold expression that betrayed nothing, rather like the mask that Nero preferred to wear when he was talking to Number One.

"Not now," Piper said, her face still stone-cold, "Not here."

Nero dismissed Raven and Nina. On her way out, Nina added, "Sir is very nice. I'll try not to kill him for you."

"Sir?" Nero asked.

"If I refer to something by its name, it creates mental problems if I am forced to kill it," Nina explained, "Goodbye, Sir. Or, goodbye, that guy with the suit." The doors slammed as she left.

"Piper, I never knew," Nero repeated himself as he got up to sit nearer to her, "You never told me."

"It never came up," her voice was pained as she stood, heading for the door, "We'll discuss this later, Max. If you don't mind, I'm going back to my quarters â€" our quarters â€" before dinner."

Piper sat on her bed, her knees curled up to her chest. Dinner had passed in silence; Nero had either not known what to say or not known

how to say it.

That had been one of the worst days of her life—no one else had known, but Piper had landed first. She had known that it was bad and she was lucky to be alive, but then the other body had hit the concrete—

Someone knocked softly on the door, and she muttered something like, "Come in."

Nero sat down next to her, engulfing Piper in a hug. "Wanna talk?" he asked sympathetically.

"Not really," Piper sighed, hugging him back halfheartedly, "but I guess I should. **You** deserve an explanation." She swallowed the lump in her throat, "We were fourteen. It was right after her birthday—I'm older."

"My G—" Nero trailed off.

"We were fourteen. It went almost exactly like she had said, but I hit the ground first for some reason. I hadn't even opened my eyes when I heard a crack against the asphalt and—there was blood, a whole lot of blood, Max. All over me, all over the sidewalk... I sat up, but Joseph couldn't move. He was breathing for a good two, three minutes before—Max, all I could do was promise that the medics would help him. His last words were, '_Piper, help me_.' And then he—he simply stopped breathing."

She hugged Nero fiercely, finally breaking down and crying on his shoulder. "Max, I couldn't do anything at all. I blamed his death on her for a long time—and then I found out about the experiments—Max, I was all wrong! I had been blaming her, but it was the labs themselves who were responsible for his death. Ever since then, I've been carrying weapons constantly. **That's why I'm so paranoid about losing you.**"

"Not paranoid," Nero corrected, "Protective."

"Yes, protective," Piper approved, "Very protective. Do me a favor and don't suddenly drop dead, Max. I would have to have Raven run me through with a sword."

"I'm surprised you haven't already, Piper! I'll try my best to survive," Nero smiled at her tearstained face. She had stopped crying —it was a sign of weakness, after all, and she was **never supposed to be weak**. Or so she thought. "Just watch my back."

"Don't worry. I will," she smiled weakly.

He gave her a quick kiss as she said, "Max, thanks for listening. I'm sure you'd rather not fall asleep with images of blood in your head, but thank you."

"You're welcome, Angel. Don't worry about images of blood. This is HIVE, after all."

Piper woke up as her Blackbox bleeped. True to his word, Nero hadn't left when she fell asleep. She had cried her eyes out and curled up to himâ€|what a lovely person he was, even if he was the epitome of evil. Considerate.

The Blackbox bleeped again, and Nero passed it over as she sat up. Flipping it open, she read aloud, "_**I'm coming for you.**_"

"What?" Nero rubbed his eyes, trying to make sense of it, "Must be some joke of Malpense's. I'll have Pike debug it for you."

"Max, Otto wouldn't do something this sick." She showed him the next message that had just appeared on the blue screen: "_**I don't like how you're forgetting me, Piper.**_"

"Like I said, it's probably just broken," Nero told her.

"_**And I don't like how you're replacing me with that washed-up, old has-been of a GLOVE agent**_," the box read.

"Max, I have a gut feeling that this isn't Ottoâ€|" Piper looked at him â€" she was genuinely scared, which set Nero on edge, "I think it's him. He's alive. The SSK labsâ€|"

"That's impossible. You saw him die with your own eyes," Nero consoled.

"You don't know about their labs, Max. They can bring the dead back to life, and they can make the living beg for death."

"Piper, he's dead," Nero's gray eyes met hers', "and he can't come back."

"Maxâ€|" her retort was stifled with a kiss, which distracted them both from the next incoming message: "_**I love you, Piper. And I'll kill that idiot and his whole army if I have to.**_"

Piper's Blackbox had been debugged by the Professor, but the grave and disturbing messages kept appearing:

"_**Why would you do this to me? I've never stopped loving you.**_"

"_**I dream about you every night, do you know that? I bet he doesn't, at least not decently.**_"

"_**Tell Nina that she's going to pay for what she did to me. To us.**_"

She didn't bother mentioning it to Nero, since he believed Joseph to be well and truly dead. She had too, up until these inescapable messages started to appear out of the blue.

Nero was teaching a Villainy Studies lesson on serial killers, and Piper was sitting in the back of the room answering emails on her Blackbox when a new message popped up:

"_**You'll have to choose.**_"

She shrugged it off as Nero clicked through the slideshow showing bodies found in various states of decomposition. He had just asked the class, "The killer Ed Gein inspired a series of movies, as you should have read about in the chapter. Last class we saw the first in the series. How were the killing styles of the series' main murderer, Norman, and the actual murderer, Gein, alike?" when Piper pulled him aside.

"Max, I know you don't believe me, but look at this." Every ear in the room strained to hear their conversation; perhaps it would bury some of the rumors about them that were going around. Then again, something they say could set the rumor mill on fire. Listening in was imperative.

Piper showed him the latest message: "_**Piper, love, I'm coming to get you back from that dirty old creep. And I won't be alone. I'll see you soon, very soon.**_"

"Maxâ€¦"

"Piper, go outside and let Raven know about this. Have her put us on a low level lockdown."

Piper went outside, and a moment or two later, Raven called over the school's intercom, "Attention HIVE students and staff, we are now going under a minimal lockdown situation due to the possibility of an outside threat. Students will report directly to meals, classes, and accommodation blocks within the time allotted and within ten minutes of final bells. They are requested to travel in groups of two, preferably three or more, and they will be accompanied by staff members if they need to access the sick bay. Again, this is because we have received an advanced warning of a possible outside threat. If this threat remains, we will let you know via Blackbox communication. Have a nice day. That is all."

Piper came back into the room and Nero met her at the door, telling the students that they had a free moment or two while he talked to her outside.

As soon as Nero closed the door, he pulled her into a quick hug, whispering, "Piper, I don't want you out of my sight until we deal with this. I don't want to know what they did in those labs. You've told me some pretty gruesome stories about them; I'm worried about what he's become, and I don't want him to be able to get anywhere near you. Yes, I believe you now, Angel. I'll never doubt you again. So stay near me. Please?"

"Max, if he tries to hurt youâ€¦" she trailed off, "I'm going to kill him. I'll make sure it won't be a painless death either."

"Piper, honestly try and stay safe," Nero begged.

"Max, it isn't **me** he's going to try and hurt! He'll take me, but he wants to **kill** you, and nothing we do can change that," Piper's eyes sparkled as she tried to make him feel bad.

"Piper, I'll stay armed, I promise." He gave her a kiss and headed for the door.

"Max," Piper noted that half of the class had their faces pressed up against the window and were chattering away, probably about what Nero just did, "I'll make sure you don't get hurt. I'll **die **before I let that happen."

"C'mon, Piper," he pecked her cheek as they walked in.

The class was back in their seats within ten seconds, and the room was dead quiet within twenty. Piper sat at Nero's desk, putting her feet up as Nero took his post at the lectern. Someone in the back of the room wolf-whistled, and the class erupted into laughter. Nero smiled and confirmed, "Yes, as you kids would say, we are 'going out'."

"Be safe, Doctor," someone laughed. But Piper had a more pressing concern than throttling whoever had made that remark â€" her Blackbox displayed another message: "_**I bet you're even more beautiful now than you were when I met you. Nero won't shareâ€|I'll just have to take back what's mine, and kill anyone who stands in my way.**_"

23. Von Sturm's Party

A few hours later, a man in an immaculate suit and a cravat the color of fresh blood walked into a garden party hosted by a reclusive Baron. The woman next to him wore a dress of the same bloody color, black heels, and a necklace with an olive wreath on it, something she had sworn that she would never take off. And of course, she came with her fair share of concealed weapons.

"Max, what are we gaining from this? We're both under a **threat**, and you took me to a **party**," the woman asked as they began to walk into the mill of people.

"Diplomacy, my dear, and the opportunity to show you off," Nero smiled a movie-star smile, "Almost every GLOVE member is attending, not just the ruling council. Hello, Your Excellency." A man in a crown passed by them with a wave. Nero and Piper had landed the Shroud near von Sturm's compound after flying as quickly as possible from HIVE. Nero had **never** been late to any sort of function, let alone a GLOVE function, and he didn't want to fall into that pattern now. After all, one mistake leads to many more, and then you get caught in the avalanche that follows.

Nero took a glass of champagne from the nearest walking waiter, despite Piper's warning, "Remember what happened last time, Max?"

His reply was cut short by none other than the lecherous bear that they had run into in Paris. "Nero!" The bear pulled Max into an awkward embrace, and asked, as Nero smoothed out the wrinkles the bear had made in his suit, "Is this only your bodyguard?"

"It's official, Shiorski, paws off," Nero smiled, "Piper, this is Theodor Shiorski. Theodor, Piper," Piper shook the man's hand and tried to edge closer to Nero, not wanting to get caught in a hug. The difference between the two was almost shocking â€" here you had the perfectly tailored and wonderfully social Nero, and the shabbily-suited and awkward bear, both members of GLOVE, both watched

by Number One.

"Oh really, Nero? How much does she cost? If you know what I mean."

Within seconds there was a gleaming silver switchblade at Shiorski's throat. "Look at me and say that again," Piper sneered, "***I dare you.**"

"**Piper**," Nero grabbed her wrist.

"Well Mister Chivalrous wasn't defending me," she hissed back.

"Piper, you gave me **three seconds** to do anything! I know you're on edge tonight, and I am too, but at least **try** to be social and not fillet anyone," Nero whispered in her ear.

She was spared having to come up with a response when her Blackbox went off. "Excuse me, _**gentlemen**_," she said with an edge like a knife to her voice, "But I'm getting an urgent message here."

She stepped off to the side as the bear Shiorski made some comment to Nero that he pretended to laugh off. She knew that laugh â€" he was deeply offended. Shiorski was apparently digging himself into an even deeper hole. She shook her head, opening the Blackbox. "_**You look nice tonight, Piper. But I don't like who you're with. I wish I could be there, but I'll see you soon enough.**_"

"Max," she pulled Nero over, showing him the message.

"Let's mill in with the others. Get lost in the crowd. There's less of a chance that we'll be targeted with all of them around, and I'm sure he doesn't want to accidentally kill any royalty tonight. We can't leave until after the Baron makes his speech. I wouldn't be polite."

"Fine, but the next person that even looks suspicious will be pinned on the ground for the duration of the speech."

"Reasonable enough," Nero said, pulling her into the crowd as Baron von Sturm stood up on a raised platform, "Good. We won't have to stay for much longer."

"Ladies and gentlemen, royalty and honored members of GLOVE, welcome! I have gathered you all here today to inform you that we, as members of the Global League Of Villainous Enterprises, must stick together and not begin to fight among ourselves. I for one have seen too many petty arguments carried out into dangerous and deadly multi-generational blood feuds that have costed us as an organization dearly. Why even tonight I witnessed one of our members threatening another over a small remark. My dear friends, we cannot descend into the madness that will cost all of us blood. We cannot descend into anarchy.

Tonight, my friends, we should be here for an evening of lighthearted fun and friendship building. We should leave here tonight knowing that the people here will **not** stab us in the back, but be here to support our endeavors. We should also know that we have all been chosen, chosen to support a world-wide initiative, one that spans all

barriers, all generations and all people: ****evil****.

With that, I leave you to enjoy the rest of your evening, and I look forward to seeing you alive again." Von Strum stepped down during a thunderstorm of applause, just as Piper's Blackbox went off again.

"_**I'll see you at HIVE, Piper. If you're lucky, you'll get there before we do.**_"

24. Prepare for Battle

Piper had changed into her classic black jumpsuit in the Shroud's bathroom. She stowed her katanas below her seat as Nero called Raven via Blackbox.

"Raven, put the school under an Omega Black lockdown. Grab a select few students to help the teachers arm the hallways. Make sure the rest are asleep. The threat has materialized and will be heading to HIVE soon. We will try to be back before they get there, but if we aren't, prepare the school for battle."

"Attention HIVE students and staff, this is Raven, speaking in place of Doctor Nero. Students, please report to your accommodation blocks ****NOW****. We are going under a code Omega Black lockdown. Our previous threat has materialized, and it is one that is ****worse than we have ever seen before****. Students have ****five minutes**** to return to their accommodation blocks. Anyone found outside of the blocks or the sick bay will be escorted directly to a holding room while we decide what to do with you. Punishments will be even more severe than they have in the past. This is not a threat. It is a warning. Anyone who is found helping those coming in from the outside will be called a traitor and treated as such. That is all."

Raven checked that her katanas were stowed securely on her back and sprinted off to accommodation block seven.

Just before the doors bolted shut, Raven entered accommodation block seven. She grabbed Otto, Wing, Shelby, and Laura, and pulled them outside, where a group of differently colored jump-suited kids were waiting. They joined the group as Raven began to say, "We are under attack, and the teachers and guards alone cannot fend it off. We simply do not have enough forces. You have been selected as the best of your classes to help us fight. If anyone does not want to, you may go back to your blocks. I wouldn't blame you, but we need all the help that we can get."

No one objected, so Raven began doling out instructions. "Fanchu, take half of your group to the grappler cavern. Get them outfitted, and bring some back for the other half. Trinity, outfit the other half with weapons, and as before, bring back extra. Brand, Malpense, get to HIVEmind's central hub with your team. Make sure he's online and activate every defense that you can and see if you can set up any more. Make sure you hit the switch for the electric fence. Watch out, though, we're having a Shroud return, and if they are stopped, we will ****all**** have our heads on the chopping block. Understand, everyone? I'll meet you later to assign stations. Go!"

The teams raced off in different directions, and Raven noted that the

teachers were beginning to prepare as well. The Colonel had his best kids working with the guards. Good â€" they all had rifles. She didn't doubt that they had the training for them.

As she rounded a corner, she called to Professor Pike over her Blackbox, "How long do we have until they get here? What does the radar say?"

"The Shroud'll be here in fifteen minutes or so. The unknown group will be here in the same amount of time."

"Pike, I'm heading up to the cavern. I want Nero and Piper to be on the ground **by the time I get there.** Understood?"

"We'll try, Raven," Pike ended the call.

"You aren't fighting, Max," Piper argued as they caught sight of HIVE, "I can't let you get killed. You've got a target on your head and you know it. You'll be the best kill that any one of them can get."

"Piper, I've been GLOVE trained, and I was on the field for yearsâ€"!"

"But how long ago was that? That was a while ago, and you haven't done much fighting since! I can't let you risk it!"

"I'm going to fight and **that's final.**"

"Max, **I warned you.** It'll be your fault if I have to haul you out of there," Piper said solemnly, looking out the window with worry.

"I'll at least try to stay safe. I won't make your job too difficult," Nero's gray eyes met hers, "I promise. My word is law, remember that."

"Remember the Emperor," she smiled as they landed. Raven was already waiting on the runway. Grabbing her katanas, they jumped off of the Shroud to prepare for battle.

Otto, Wing, Shelby, and Laura had met up in the hallways and were racing for their allotted battle station.

"Wing, a Shroud just landed. I'm betting that it's Nero and Piper," Shelby commented as they ran, "I just got the report over my Blackbox. Where are we headed again?"

"Right outside Pike's lab, near one of the accommodation blocks," Laura panted. They had been running for a few minutes now, dodging other teams who had already reached their stations and were making a final check of their weapons.

"What's this threat?" Otto asked, "They seem to be overreacting."

"Nero **never** overreacts. This is something big, and the fight is going to be bigger than **anything** we have experienced in training. I can feel it," Wing said as they reached their assigned station.

"Wisdom from the ninja master," Shelby laughed as she made sure she had enough rounds of bullets, "Hey, guys, did anyone think of bringing any Sleepers, just in case we run out of bullets?"

No one had figured to grab any, but they ducked into a nearby weapons locker to see if there were any Sleepers left. The shelves that were usually fully stocked (not that they would know that) were almost bare. The group grabbed the last four Sleepers, leaving only a broken one behind.

They were still inside when they heard the first of many battle cries, this one emanating from one of the large groups posted at the far entrance to HIVE. The Shroud landing cavern was under siege.

"Let's go, team," Wing said, pulling them out of the locker's relative safety and back to their posts, ready to take on the invading hoard.

Somewhere far away, Piper's Blackbox beeped. "_**We're here. We have the best in the business, so you don't need to fight. We are unstoppable. Just give yourself up and no one will get hurt. Not even your Prince Charming.**_"

25. Invasion & Activation

A.N.: THIS IS A GORE WARNING, DUE TO THE VIOLENT NATURE OF THIS BATTLE. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED, SO PLEASE DO NOT COMPLAIN ABOUT WHAT YOU CHOOSE TO READ!

The first round of mercenaries had invaded the landing cavern. Groups of armed guards were already taking them on. Many of the soldiers had skills to match those of the guards, which deeply worried Raven.

"Good luck," Raven heard, tuning around to see Piper and Nero exchange a quick kiss.

"I won't need it, Max. Don't die."

"Ick," said Raven as she shifted into battle mode. Nina dropped down beside her, armed to the teeth.

"Raven, the labs have likely armed them, and some of them may have superpowers. Just a note," Nina warned her, slicing a man's throat as he staggered into them.

"Nice to know." Raven ran into the thick of the battle.

Wing was the first to see a group of men barreling down the hallway towards their station. These men were burly, looking like they had been training for this moment for years. Within seconds, they had descended on them.

Otto and Shelby worked together to send one flailing off of the balcony and into a three-story drop. The other two were easily dispatched, one by Wing alone, and the other by the whole group's efforts. They simply pushed the dead bodies off of the railing with a

heave, and other than a stained floor, the hallway was clear again.

"That wasn't all that bad," Laura commented, "But I bet there's a ****heck**** of a war going on in that cavern."

The battle in the cavern had expanded into the hallways, flowing out to the second and third stories of the building. Soon enough, the whole school would be at war.

Nina and Raven were battling a pair of gorillas. Well, to Nina they looked like gorillas. Either way, a death warrant was issued on all of the invaders. They had been fighting these men for a few minutes when the first HIVE guard fell. Gorilla One looked away when he heard the shout. "Nice focus, ape man," Nina grinned, knocked him out cold. Raven killed the second man as he slipped in the blood of the first.

"Nice bit of cardio," Nina laughed, "I wonder how everyone else is doing. I got a report that Fanchu's group felled three, but the rest of the school seems to be in chaos."

"I'm just glad that the other students were drugged," Raven sighed as she sliced through a soldier that was squaring off with a HIVE guard. He had lost his weapon, and they appeared to be boxing.

Without warning, the whole room was filled with a loud voice. *****This is the commander of operations tonight, ladies and gentlemen. If you want to cut your losses and retreat now, then you only have to deliver Piper to me. I will be joining the battle to hunt for her and some other people on my list. If not, let the battle continue.*****

Raven and Nina glanced at each other. They would have cared less, but the voice sounded foreboding. They knew when they were being lied to. "We need to kill the commander." Nina nodded in agreement, and they set off for the hostile ship.

Piper knew that voice. She had trained with the owner of that voice and two others. Their team had been the Experimentals â€" the ones who trained all day and got infusions and injections of DNA that was supposed to give them superpowers. Jason had gone first. He had succumbed to the infection resulting from a failed injection of flight-powered DNA. He had died in battle, but the autopsy said that he was doomed anyway. He had had a month after the battle, if that, according to the medical examiner.

She and Nina had made it out aliveâ€"but Joseph was another of the SSK's experiments, warped and changed since the accident. The voice sounded the same, but now it was the voice of a cold-blooded killer. Shaking her head, she knocked down the nearest invader.

*****This fight has cost you a lot****," Joseph was saying, his voice echoing through the halls, *****but it can cost you a lot more. I am joining the battle, and you have left me with no choice but to activate my soldiers.*****

On the word *****activate*****, all of the mercenaries stopped for a second. The lucky members of the HIVE teams cut a few of them down in the blink of an eye. However, when the soldiers started to fight

again, their eyes were blazing red. The Animus fluid had been activated.

26. Choices

****A.N.: THIS IS A GORE WARNING. DUE TO THE VIOLENT NATURE OF THE FIGHT, SOME BLOOD IS TO BE EXPECTED. ****

Piper smiled as Nero caught one of the Animus-infected men in a chokehold. Even for an ex-agent, he could hold his own in a fight. He sent the man spiraling onto the concrete floor the level below, taking part of the balcony with him.

"Told you I could still fight," Nero gloated.

"No time for that, Max. We have to killâ€¦" She stopped as a black-clad figure came around the corner. The figure stopped as well.

The boy was taller and slightly glowing, but he was nearly the same as Piper had remembered. There was no trace of the fall and no trace of the SSK bionics that had given him life again.

"Hello, Piper," he beamed, ****I've missed you.****

"Joseph?" Piper asked, "You're alive?"

"Never better," he pulled her into a hug, "What about you, Princess? Is this the Nero that I've heard you've been seeing?"

"That's none of your business, Joseph! Why are you back here? How did you find me?"

"Oh, yes it ****is**** my business. I've come back for you. It was easy finding you. After all, I heard the security tapes; 'find the emperor' and whatnot. There was only one place you could have been. Of course, I had help."

"Who would ****dare**** help you?"

"I have friends in higher places than you do. Are you ready? Let's get out of here," he offered.

"Never. I would rather ****die**** than go with you! How many of my friends have you killed tonight?!" she asked venomously.

"What happened to the innocent girl I fell in love with, Princess? What happened to you?"

"You ****died****. ****That's what happened****," she spat back.

"Then you replaced me."

"You can't replace people. You don't replace people."

"So I can just shoot him now?"

"No!" she cried, but the bullet had already left the gun. Nero tried to duck and avoid it, but a gleaming katana blade flicked the bullet

away effortlessly.

Nina dropped from the ceiling saying, "Welcome back from the dead. They miss you. **Now go and join them**." She swung the sword, but he had twisted it into a useless lump of metal instantaneously.

"See what bionics can do?" he asked, flinging Nina over the railing.

"I'm okay," came her voice, "but I'll be back, Death Boy, and I'll be back to kill you once and for all."

"Piper, you have to come with."

"Make me."

"You'll come with me or he dies, along with the whole school. No, I'll give you a choice. Me or the old, washed-up field agent?" Joseph asked with an evil glint in his eye.

"I call a foul," she said, "I want an informed decision. I want ten minutes to talk to each of you. Then I'll decide." This was a last-ditch effort to stop more blood from being shed, and he could tell. Piper couldn't let anyone else die. She had caused enough lives to end abruptly already.

Joseph sat on the desk next to Piper. They had been steered into an empty classroom and given time, but the battle was still raging outside. After all, the only way to call off a soldier of Overlord's was to kill it.

"What do you want to know?" he asked with a sly smile, "That you don't already."

"Why Overlord? He's going to take you over and kill you."

"Overlord gives me power," Joseph said, "Integrated with my bionic brain and systems, he makes me nearly unstoppable. It's worth the risk."

"What happened to you? I mean, the **old you**? The one who would steal the trainers' golf carts, the one who would take our team up to the roof to make s'mores, the one who I first met in the SSK?" Piper questioned.

"The old me is dead. He is what died that day. I'm a new me now, a bionic me, a superhuman me," he pulled her into a rough kiss, much worse than Nero's, "an even better me." He winked, causing Piper to wonder about the exact extent of bionic applications as she wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

"Disgusting," she sneered, "and get your hands off of me."

"I can give you anything and everything. With Overlord's help, of course, I could even give you a planet. Pick one."

"Not interested."

"Hmmâ€¦playing hard to get, huh?" he nodded to the guard who came to tell him that time was up, "Think about what I've said. If you come

with me, **you won't have to watch the execution.**"

Nero was thrown into the room and the door slammed behind him. "Piper," he pulled her into a hug, "are you alright? He didn't hurt you?"

"No, Max, I'm fine. He's going to kill you though, no matter **what** I decide," she didn't let go of him, for fear of letting go of the only stable thing in the fight.

"Piper, there are two kinds of evil. One is more on the good side. That's us. The other one wants the world to descend into anarchy and barbarianism. But sometimes the evil we speak of is neither, and sometimes it is both." They sat down, Nero still not letting go of her.

"Max, what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that there will be no good outcome for **all of us** here. **Someone's** going to have to die tonight, and I guess it's my turn."

"No," she was close to crying now, "No. I can't let that happen, Max."

"Piper, I could promise you the world, but the decision is really up to you. You have to look at facts. What's going to cause less people to suffer? I'm just part of the consequences on both sides," Nero tried to explain, "Just a constant in the equation."

"No, I can't let you die, Maxâ€¦ I can'tâ€¦"

He gave her a kiss as the door was wrenched open. Time was up.

"Piper, remember the Emperor. Remember that the Emperor loves you."

The door was slammed shut, but she still whispered, "I will." As if all the world was listening.

Piper, Nero, and Joseph had gathered in the hallway a few minutes later. The battle was still raging below, and shouts still echoed up to them as she was asked, "Well? Make your choice."

"Joseph, Max, I-"

Joseph cut her off, "Let me make this easier for you." He drew a knife, and with one swift motion, stabbed Nero in the chest before Piper could blink, much less disarm him. He walked away calmly as Nero was falling to the floor, saying, "I'll give you a bit more time."

Piper caught him just before he would have cracked his skull open. Nina reappeared in the hallway, but ran away quickly, yelling for a medic.

"Piper, a medic won't do anything. They'll be too late," Nero was losing blood and turning pale quite quickly, and there was no amount of pressure that would staunch the flow of blood from his

wound.

"Don't say that, Max. **Please don't say that.**"

"No, I told you, I would be a loss no matter what. It just didn't happen the way we expected."

"Max, I'm going to kill him," she said, holding his hand, "I'm going to make sure he dies and stays dead. **Forever.**"

"Get revenge for me," his voice was weak.

"I will. Max, please don't—please don't die."

"Piper, fate is fate. We can't change it. Come here."

She leaned down to put her ear next to his mouth. "Piper, remember me. Remember the Emperor. I love you." He gave her a kiss and closed his eyes, just as the medics arrived.

"Max, no—I love you. I loved you—" she remained sitting on the ground, next to the pool of blood, even after the medics had left with the body.

An explosion rocked the building as she stood up, both katana swords drawn and cracking viciously with purple energy. "I loved you, Max. He won't be allowed to cheat death for very long. **And now the time has come where someone has to pay.**"

27. Think Again

****A.N.: AGAIN, A WARNING ABOUT POSSIBLY BLOODY SCENES (I BET YOU'RE GETTING TIRED OF THESE WARNINGS!)****

Piper rounded the corner on the second floor's west wing to find Nina heading back towards her with a message from Dr. Scott. "Piper, Suit is alive, but Scott doesn't think things look good. He says that he'll be gone any moment. It's kind of like a coma-sort-of-thing."

"Suit? I thought you called—Max—'Sir'." Piper said gravely.

"Since when does he ****not**** wear suits? After all, remember my name rule," Nina explained, "But I take it you don't want to talk about Suit now—off to off someone?"

"Let's go find that animatronic idiot."

Raven got a call from Dr. Scott while she was fighting. Half listening, she answered via an earpiece (_Pike had been right, it was a great idea!_) "Raven."

"Raven, this is Dr. Scott. Dr. Nero's condition—let Piper know—try to call—middle of fighting—tragic, really—I'll try and contact—looking for Joseph—" She could barely make out half of the conversation, since she was in the middle of a battle herself.

A girl, nearly the size of one of the Gorilla men that Nina had killed earlier, had jumped down from the flight of stairs above her waving something that Raven could only describe as a machete. With an easy shoulder roll, Raven was holding her down, and soon enough the girl's head was stuck in the banisters. She had grazed Raven's arm with her weapon, but it didn't seem to be poisoned, so she continued cutting people down.

The sick bay had not yet been breached, but Dr. Scott was running around like a chicken missing its head. There were people lying on almost every bed, and plenty of them had been shuffled around for Nero's arrival. Scott had gone in with a blood clotting agent and a needle, and the whole bay seemed to have held its breath while he carefully stitched Nero up, making sure that any damage to internal organs was accounted for.

When he had emerged from the curtained-off area with blood covering his gloves, he held his hands up in triumph. "He's alive, but ****definitely**** not well." He was met with a roaring cheer from the HIVE fighters that were filling the room, even the group hobbling in clutching their wounds that had just then crossed the threshold.

The guards outside were doing their job well, and as Dr. Scott plunged into work and his assistants tended to the more minor injuries, the bay stayed safe. He had put a Blackbox transmitter earpiece into his ear and tried to call Piper, but she didn't respond. _She's on the hunt for blood_, he reasoned.

Wing and his group were doing well. They had fended off two more attacks on the closest accommodation block, and were holding their ground. He and Otto took care of a rogue fighter coming down the hallway, cackling, while Laura pulled out her beeping Blackbox.

"Guys, they're saying that there was an injury on our sideâ€|one of our main fighters was hurt badlyâ€|oh my G-dâ€|" she trailed off, staring at the live feed from her Blackbox in shock.

****What? Who was it? Are they okay?****" Shelby asked, looking over Laura's shoulder. She gasped when she saw the words on the screen.

"Raven? Did Raven get killed?" Otto gasped.

"No," was all Laura could squeak, ****Nero.****"

They all descended upon the device at once, reading the sparsely detailed passage that ended with, "_If you see Piper, help her. She is after the man who did this, and will not let him live._"

"It must have been a total surprise. Piper would have never allowedâ€|not in a billion years," Shelby said, still in awe that such a thing could have occurred.

"At least Scott got him stitched up," Wing said, trying to see the bright side of all of this.

"But they don't have a definite answer as to whether he'll live or not."

"I bet that they aren't even ****looking**** for Piper. I ****know ****where she is," Otto commented, "In the hospital, crying her eyes out over Nero at his bedside."

As soon as the words left his mouth, a deadly sounding voice said, "Think again, Malpense." Piper appeared out of nowhere, holding her two crackling katana swords and wearing an expression that Otto had only ever seen on the faces of murderers and serial killers. ****Think again.****"

28. Birthday Presents

****A.N.: HERE IT IS AGAIN, A BLOOD WARNING!****

They found their target on the third floor, stalking the hallway alone, like he had before the SSK had regenerated him.

"Nina, stay here and watch my back. I have an interesting plan. Fanchu, take your group to the other end of the hall and do the same thing." Piper walked out, appearing to be unarmed except for her katana swords.

"Joseph," she smiled, "I've made my decision, even though you never let me ****tell**** you that you had won anyway. You had won from the beginning."

"Oh really?" he smiled, "So killing Nero didn't affect you at all?"

"No, it did. You know it did, but it reminded me of something that he had told me," she explained as he raised an eyebrow, "That if someone else came along, that I should go with them if they were closer in age than we were. He knew that it seemed wrongâ€|"

****That's**** the Piper I remember," he said gleefully, pulling her into a kiss that was nowhere near as gentle as Nero's had been. She smiled, thinking, well this Piper is a lie. "Are you ready to leave here once and for all, Princess Piper?"

"Of course, Joseph. Let's get out of here," she said, pulling him towards the cavern. Just as they reached Nina's hiding spot, she stopped him. "Joseph, one more thing." She pulled him into a kiss that landed him with a gun to his temple.

"Ah, Piper, always the crafty one, aren't you?" he laughed, but the laughter had died from his eyes. Piper could see the old Joseph, the one that knew when he was cornered.

"But you said thatâ€|"

"People ****lie****, Joseph, especially in our business," she smiled an evil smile, "as we told a Russian agent in the middle of Siberia back in our SSK days, dasvidonya. Umeret. ****Die.****" She pulled the trigger, splattering blood, brains, and parts of what looked like an advanced computer chip all over the wall.

He crumpled to the floor, dead before he hit it, but Piper placed a well-aimed kick anyway. "Nina," she spoke up, "make sure our friend here is fed to your favorite shark, okay? I'm heading down to clean

up, and then to the sick bay."

As soon as Nina saluted and said, "Sure thing, Mrs. Suit.," Piper took off, knifing and shooting down enemy agents on her way.

Piper was on her way to wash the blood off when Raven came over the intercom, announcing that they had won. All students needed to return to their accommodation blocks, and anyone who had helped would be receiving extra credit points in their worst class.

As soon as she was cleaned up, Piper went down to the sick bay, where Dr. Scott let her in with a smile. "He's still alive. In fact, he's doing much, ****much better****."

"Thank you, Henry," she said, giving him a hug as they walked over to Nero's bedside, "Thank you for saving him." He looked quite peaceful in sleep, but badly bruised and bandaged.

"Visiting hours end in a little while," Scott told her. The clock was ticking at half-past eleven already. He left as a patient in another bed called for him, asking about their release.

Nero at least had some privacy; he was curtained off from the rest of the ward. Piper settled down in a chair by his bed, holding his hand and watching him sleep_. Max, how many times did I save your life, only to have you fighting for it now?_

She hadn't realized that an hour had passed until a weary-looking Dr. Scott came back. "Piper, if you want, I can open the ward as early as possible tomorrow morning. You really should go and get some rest. Goodness, I think I'll be here all night." He punctuated his sentence with a yawn.

"I'll stay, if you don't mind," she said, "I ****promise**** I won't be any trouble."

"Piper, I ****never**** allow-"

"Doctor Scott, please? I promise I won't be any trouble. It's just, well, it's ****Max****, Henry," she pleadingly tried to explain.

"Piper?" Nero croaked, opening his eyes, "Whatâ€|?"

"He's dead. Nina made sure of it. She made sure her sharks are well fed. It's a bit past midnight now, and I'm begging Henry here to let me stay," Piper smiled, kissing his cheek, "Max, I can't believe this. They said you were going to die. I thought you ****had**** died."

"Piper, in case you haven't noticed, people don't seem to stay dead around here," Nero smiled. Even through all of the dirt and grime of the night, he still had a movie-star smile. "It's past midnight, you said? Happy birthday, then, Piper. Sorry you have to spend it here. Scott, let her stay."

"Max, you're right! I forgot all about birthdays. I've just been trying to make sure we all get out of this alive. Thanks," she smiled back, "But you can be my present this year. You surviving. The best present I could have asked for."

29. Join the Hunt

Piper spent her days and nights following the battle with Nero in the sick bay. Scott, Nero, and all of the people injured by the fight sang her "Happy Birthday" and split a cake, Scott sharing the news that the blade had missed Nero's heart by a few centimeters and it hadn't hit any major arteries or veins. He was expected to make a full recovery.

The three of them would sit up talking late into the night, sometimes joined by Raven and Nina when security watches were slow. Scott would eventually leave, dragged away by tiredness or heeding the calls of his patients.

Piper would stay there, often falling asleep holding Nero's hand (much to the delight of the other patients, who would sit there and say, "Aww"). Scott would usually bring her a pillow, leaving the curtained-off room with a smile at the couple.

On the day of Nero's release, all of the students had been gathered in the dining hall. Both Piper and Nero took the stage to applause as Otto whispered to Wing, "Think this is the engagement announcement?"

"Shhhh," Wing admonished as Nero began to speak.

A hush fell over the crowd as he said, "Boys and girls, I would like to commend all of you who participated in defending your school and keeping the others safe. Thank you to those of you who helped, and also to those of you who helped by staying out of the way. I would like to put to rest all of the rumors that have been flying around about my current condition. First of all, and most importantly, yes, I will be making a full recovery. No, I was not shot. I heard a lot of that talk going around, even in the sick bay. And no matter what anyone says, it was ****NOT**** Piper's fault. It was entirely mine. I was being irresponsible with my own life. If you would, please do not encourage any of the rumors that you have heard. The facts are what I've told you today. Questions?"

No one dared to speak up, except for a boy in the very back row with a deep Southern drawl. "Sir, is it true that you and Piper have beenâ€|ahâ€| "

"I get what you're hinting at, and the whole school seems to believe it, but no. We haven't," Nero said, "despite what you've heard to the contrary."

"Can we call you two '_Sniper_'? You know, like '_Brangelina_', it's Nero and Piper," a Political Stream girl asked.

"I see nothing wrong with that," Nero laughed (but then soon turned pale, as his wounds were still somewhat fresh), "Anyone else?"

"Yeah, when's the wedding?" a shout was heard.

"Not today," was Nero's only response, "That is enough."

"Max, are you alright?" Piper poked her head into his room, "Good night, then, field agent."

"Good night, Angel. Sweet dreams." Funny. She had had nothing but nightmares since the night of the battle, but she had always woken up in the hospital, clutching Nero's hand for dear life.

Piper was falling. Joseph was falling. No, it was Max. "Max, stop!" she yelled over the crushing wind, but there was no hope of stopping.

_ They tried desperately to cling to the building beside them, but all Nero could do was shout, "I love you, Piper!" just as he landed with a sickening crack on the pavement._

_ Piper lay there with him, unable to help. "Max, look at me," she begged, but the quickly pooling blood and grey matter clued her in â€" he was knocking on Death's door with a submachine gun. "Max, the medicsâ€"|"_"

_ "Piperâ€"love you." His grey eyes closed, and Piper was weeping as he stopped breathing._

Piper woke up with a start. Her Blackbox was on charge. She was in her own room at HIVE, not the SSK. Good.

She poked her head into Nero's room to check on him; she was constantly alert and scared to death that anything would happen.

"Coming to join me?" he asked groggily as she sat down on his bed, still quite pale. "You're welcome to. That same nightmare again, wasn't it?"

"You ****died****, Max. I can't let you die. You already seem to be running short on lives," she told him as he pulled her over.

"Max, next week I'm going with Raven."

"What? Where?" he planted a kiss on her cheek, "You're going to leave me here?"

"Max, I'm joining the Hunt." IVH

30. Aboard the Shroud

A week later, Piper and Raven were going through their last-minute checklists for the Hunt. The Shroud was filled with Alphas, supplies, and the hand-picked tracking teams that they would be commanding. The engines were revving as Nero pulled Piper aside.

"I'll let you two have a word," Raven said, stalking off, heading onboard the Shroud without a backward glance.

"Piper, stay here," Nero begged, "****please****."

"Max, consider this as tactical training. I'll be back soon, and I was planning on going with anyway. Remember, less than twenty-four hours," she looked him dead in the eye, "They aren't gone. And if

what our spy satellites learned is correct, they're going to be bad."

"Piper, how am I supposed to survive?"

"Nina is ****more ****than capable of guarding you. I know you'll miss your old bodyguard, but we were rarely apart for more than a few hours a day," she checked her watch, "Two minutes until takeoff."

"Piper, I know all about your past, and you deserve to know a bit more about mine," Nero began in a rush.

"But I know all about your car-stealing days, GLOVE, your rise to powerâ€|one minute."

"Piper, a long time ago, there was a woman-" Nero was looking at his shoes.

"Max, I have to go. Don't worry; I think I know what you're saying. I'll be careful. I promise."

"No, I-"

"Piper, get up here! We have to stay on schedule!" Raven bellowed from the Shroud.

"Love you, my field agent," she smiled, giving the still-nostalgic Nero a hug.

"Love you even more, Angel." He gave her a kiss as Raven began to yell again. Watching Piper sprint away, Nero had already begun to worry. Something about this trip didn't seem right, and Nero knew enough to tell when a situation could turn deadly in a heartbeat.

"I wish you wouldn't start making out in the hallways," Raven glowered as Piper sat down next to her after speaking to the Alpha students.

"We don't do it in public. That's been Max both times the students saw anything. I told him after to watch out, butâ€|"

"Piper, a few evenings ago, I stumbled upon you two in a hallway. It wasn't exactly hidden," Raven said seriously, "You two standing there tasting each others' tongues and running hands through each others' hairâ€|you were practically melting into him. It was easy to sneak by without distracting you."

"That was ****private****. We ****thought**** we were alone," Piper glared, "He had an awfully stressful day and we ran into each other in that hall."

"Just not in front of the students, okay? The rumor mills have enough as it is," Raven cautioned, "By the way, after I ran into you, did you two end upâ€|?"

"No. Never. I'd swear on his life that we didn't."

"Alright, but for your sake, I hope his tongue tastes good," Raven laughed.

"Raven!"

Raven smiled, "Nina tells me that the desk isn't just used for paperwork."

"I'll tell you that it isn't ****that **dirty!**"

31. Captured

Piper and Raven nodded to each other, taking off into the steaming jungle of the central Congo. Their Blackboxes were set to track each others' movements and to communicate, and the Alphas had been given their customary head start.

Piper went to the north, Raven choosing the west as their teams fanned out, prepared to respond to a call. Within ten minutes, Piper had called in an Alpha that she had left tied to a tree. Her capture count started, and the guards were on to retrieve the struggling boy as Piper took off to find his compatriots.

Meanwhile, Nero was watching from behind his desk as Piper ran through the area, cutting away vines with a sweep of her katana swords in real time. It was almost as if he were tiered.

The activity had calmed down by the twelfth hour. Piper and Raven had rendezvoused once to check up on their progress, and Piper had nearly captured Raven once by accident.

Only five students remained within the area; the rest were waiting onboard the Shroud and watching events as they played out on the same feed that Nero saw.

"Hiya there, Suit," Nina walked into Nero's office, "Whatcha doing?"

"Watching the Hunt. There are five left, and we've just reached twelve hours."

"Soâ€|watching a sweating Piper run through the rain forest in a skin-tight bodysuit? ****Crafty****, Sir," she laughed as Nero turned a bit pink, "Bet you can't wait for her to get back, huh?"

"****Worried****_ is all. She wanted to do this as a training exercise, but I'm starting to second-guess my approval," Nero started intently at the screen as Piper pulled a struggling girl out of a cave and signaled for a pickup team.

"I'll take that as a '_yes_'."

"Fine, yes." He switched to Raven's video feed. She had located a boy hiding near a stream, partially concealed but in plain sight.

"Nina, Piper's gone! Her Blackbox signal just disappeared, and that can't happen unless it's been directly shot at. HIVEmind, what happened to her signal?!" Neo was definitely worried by now. This simply did not happen. ****Ever****.

"It has been destroyed, Sir. Semi-automatic rifle."

"_**Damn it**_" His fist made contact with the desk, making Nina back up a few steps, "Get a retrieval team down there _**NOW**_! Get all of the Alphas out, and tell Raven to canvass the area. Get my students out of there safely, or someone is going to have to pay! I **can't** lose her, HIVEmind. Not now, not ever, especially after Furanâ€|" Nero was fuming.

Piper heard a rustle, and as she decapitated the first man, the others came into view with guns aimed at her head. There were sixâ€|tenâ€|elevenâ€|too many to take on, **especially** with loaded guns. "DROP THE SWORDS!"

Piper had no option but to slowly lower her katanas to the ground and hold her hands up in defeat. She was tied up with her own rope and marched to a clearing in the canopy.

A ship had landed in the clearing, and a woman stood there sneering. "Hmâ€|not Natalya, but this one will do. She will be even better. Yes, Nero will give me **anything** for you, my dear. And I'm sure you will have a lot to tell us."

Piper spat in her face, "I've never met you, but I won't tell you **anything**!"

"Ah, a fighter," the woman smiled, "Yes, I will just have to **make you tell me**."

"I would rather die!" Piper shouted, "Max told me about a woman like you once. She ruined everything and tore his life apart. It was y wasn't it?!"

"Oh, _Maxie_ told you? Of course he did, he tells you everything. Which is why I want you."

Piper glared daggers at her as she was marched aboard the ship and chained to the wall against a metal plate. The woman had followed in silence, but she began to speak again as they left the ground. "Yes, we will have some interesting conversations, my dear. Your _precious Maxie_ has told you much, I can tell."

"**You have no right to call him that, you b****!** I won't tell you anything, you'll have to kill me first."

"We're going to have **quite** a lot of fun. And if you're alive when we're done, you can train at my lovely house made of glass. Excuse me, though, I'm getting ahead of myself," a cruel smile spread across here scarred face, "Call me Anastasia."

32. My Family is Dead

Nero was pacing a rut in his office floor when he received word that the Shroud had landed with all of the students safe and (relatively) intact. Raven had brought the news, telling him not to wear down the floorboards.

"Max, I promise I will stop at nothing to bring her back for you," Raven said.

"I ****warned**** her," Nero paused to turn around, pacing towards the window, "She's going to die, just likeâ€|_she_ did. I can tell."

"She's a fighter, Max. I wouldn't underestimate Piper even in a fair fight, at least not again. They won't stand a chance."

"Bring her back to me. If they can get her, they'll have no problem capturing us. Bring her back to me, Raven, please," Nero said pleadingly, "Dead or alive. ****No matter what****."

"Yes, Max." Raven headed out the door, moving straight for the Shroud launch crater as a drop of salt water hit the floor, Nero still dwelling on sad memories.

"Compose yourself, Max," he mumbled to himself, "Compose yourself."

Piper was given a new jumpsuit and thrown into a cell-like room with a pallet bed, a toilet, and a sink. The single light bulb cast shadows all over the small room.

Eventually she was thrown a loaf of bread, which she hastily devoured. What seemed like hours later, Furan was followed in by two guards, who chained Piper to the wall as a precaution.

"Now dear, as soon as you talk, we will let you return to your precious Maxie. Where is HIVE? You seemed to be able to find it easily enough. Yes, we've had our eyes on you," Anastasia smiled deviously.

"Indian Ocean," Piper said in a voice that would convince most people of anything.

****LIES!****" Furan slapped her, ****Where is HIVE?!****"

"It will take much more than that to break me, you scar-faced idiot," Piper rolled her eyes, "Like pain will do anythingâ€|"

"See you in a few days, then." Furan was smiling as they left her chained to the wall.

"Max, I've got a lead in Australia that may be able to inform us about the breach in safety," Raven reported a few days later from the underbrush of the Outback, "Seems like some of our old SSK buddies may have teamed up with hostile forces."

"Raven, it's been ****four days**** since I've seen her. Check your leads as fast as you can, and threaten death to anyone who won't speak. Every passing day is less of a chanceâ€|" Nero said to the display ion his desk.

"Max, this lead seems to have more promise than the last few, but whatever they're planning, it's in order to get at you," Raven said, chopping a poisonous snake in half as it slithered up to her ankle.

Piper was still standing when Furan came back three days later. She was starving and paler than ever, but alive.

"Let her down," Furan commanded, and Piper was chained to her bed, finally able to take the pressure off of her legs. "Piper, are you hungry? Would you like some food? Water? Or, how about some borsht? Or some delicious homemade piroshkies? Our chef here makes them from scratch every day, and they are nothing less than delicious. All you have to do is tell me something. ****Anything at all.**** The source codes, location, weaknesses, anything at all and we will feed you."

"I would rather eat **_**thallium**_**," Piper responded, although her stomach growled. Russian food was hearty â€" just what she needed to build up the strength for an escape.

"You're just like you cousin, don't you know that? She was resistant to the last."

"My family is dead. All of them," Piper admitted honestly.

"You look so much like her. She's what, ten years older?"

"My cousins are all dead."

"Natalya? I hardly think so."

33. We Have Someone Important to You

Piper had been gone for a week when Raven started knocking on GLOVE doors â€" Shiorski was on the top of her list.

Nero was impatient for news, often pacing around his office for hours at a time and constantly short on sleep. What little sleep he managed to get was punctuated by vivid nightmares of a tortured and dying Piper, to which he would wake up hoping and praying that she was actually beside him. She would wrap her arms around him and say, "Max, it was just a dream." But the other side of the bed was always cold.

Piper was forced to run all morning and swim laps all afternoon in an underground training area. She would get some sort of soup for lunch; dinner would be if she was lucky, and breakfast was nonexistent. After the clock struck eleven (and it usually ran slow), she would be allowed to collapse onto her bed, only to be woken again at three.

She had refused to give up and refused to give in to the exhaustion, strain, and hunger. Piper was confident that she could survive without divulging the information that they wanted until Raven and Nina launched a rescue mission.

Admittedly, it got lonely during the week of exhaustion â€" the second week of her imprisonment, preceded by a week of "lighter questioning" by Furan's muscle exhaustion. She missed the others quite a bit, even the annoying Nina, although she never would have said it aloud. It got boring seeing only Furan and her two guards for a fortnight.

On the fifteenth day of her imprisonment, she was allowed to sleep until six, when Anastasia and her guards came in to see if she was

ready to talk.

"Piper, we may not be able to ****make**** you talk, but I have a bit of news that may change your mind. We will give you three days to think it over," Furan loomed over her. As always, the guards had chained her to prevent a direct assault and attack on Furan. "We have something ****very**** important to you. When you and Raven left, HIVE security was greatly decreased and Nero was down two bodyguards. It was easy. We have him now."

****No****," Piper almost betrayed her surprise at the hand of cards she was dealt, "You lie. Prove it."

"We will let you think it over for three days. If you decide that you do not believe us and require further proof, we will give it to you then." Furan left and Piper was unchained. She would end up spending the next three days pacing her cell, just like Nero was safely pacing his office thousands of miles away. But she didn't know that.

"Eighteen days," Nero said to Raven, who now sat in front of him, all of her leads exhausted, "She's been gone for eighteen days."

"Max, this has no ties to Overlord, GLOVE, the SSK, or anyone we seem to be in trouble with at the moment. There is only one very remote possibility, but even I think it is impossible," Raven told him, "You need to get some sleep. Honestly, you look pretty bad. I know that this has taken a lot out of you, but you are extremely pale, there are shadows under your eyes, and you should probably shave."

"She's not going to appear out of thin air. Someone has her, Raven."

The screen of his computer lit up and a veiled face appeared. "Hello Nero," said Anastasia, "I have your little darling here. She's missing you quite a bit, and I'll have her talking soon. Max, I know you tell her a lot, but by the time you get here, I will know it all and she will be dead. Goodbye." Furan disappeared and the screen went black.

Nero shot Raven a glance as she stood. "Go."

34. The Man in the Mirror

On day eighteen, Furan entered Piper's room and tied her up. Wordlessly, Furan played a recording that her experienced technological specialists had formulated that morning, synthesizing the voice that she had heard when talking to Nero.

"Piper, she got me. Her team ambushed us at night. Oh, Piper, I hope you're okay. I would beg them to kill me if they killed you. I'm having Raven come after you. Stay safe and don't try to escape. She was on the hunt for you before I was captured. With any luck, we can get out together. I love you, Piper."

Furan snapped the player shut, looking at Piper for a reaction. "Romisky, go and whip prisoner 10642. Piper seems to need some persuasion."

"No, don't! Please!"

It was too late. The guard named Romisky had already left. About a minute later, an agonized cry echoed down the hallway. Piper clenched her fists as the cries became louder and more painful. After the third scream, she yelled out, "***Stop it! Stop hurting him! I'll tell you anything you want, just don't hurt Max! Please don't hurt Max! I'll tell you anything!***"

Furan struck her unconscious and called Nero again.

"Max, she spilled it all, and now she's dead." Furan showed Nero the feed of Piper lying unconscious.

"**You're** dead, Furan. When Raven gets to you, you'll be **worse** than dead."

Nero ended the call and put his head in his hands. Piper was dead. She had sold him out, and now she was dead.

"Hey, Suit, you okay?" Nina walked in. Nero really had to lock that door.

"No," he mumbled, wishing she would leave.

"Is she pregnant, or did she dump you?" Nina smiled, "No, really, what is it?"

"Get out," Nero's voice started to quaver, "She's dead. Now get out."

"Oh myâ€¦" Nina's eyes widened, "Really? Like, no joke?"

"**Get out.**"

After Nina left, Nero headed for his quarters, possibly looking for a good glass of wine to numb the pain.

Before finding some wine, he headed to his room, pausing at Piper's door. After a moment of contemplation, he entered her room.

She hadn't made her bed, but the rest of the room was orderly. Even the red dress that she had worn to von Sturm's party was hung up in an alcove in order to not have it lost with the jumpsuits.

Traces of Piper's memory were everywhere. The mirror had all of their notes, their letters, taped to it. She had kept them all, even the ones they had passed in GLOOVE meetings.

'_Piper, I love you._'

'_Raven's going to tell them. Hold my hand, won't you?_'

'_Max, smile. You look so cute when you smile. Pleeeeeeeeese?_'

'_I love your eyes, Max. If your eyes are the windows to your soul, you must have a troubled one._'

'_Max, stay safe. Be careful._'

'_Piper, you're beautiful. Smile for me, just once, won't you?_'

'_Max, I'll be right back. Nina and Raven want to talk in private. I'll be back as soon as I can â€" I haven't left, don't worry. Much love, your Angel Piper._'

That last one had been written while Nero was in the sick bay. Only a little while ago.

In the center of the mirror, a heartbroken and slightly disheveled man stared back at Nero. Something was lost in the pale face, especially in the eyes that looked so very empty. Anastasia Furan had now stolen two lives from him, and she would pay with her life many times over, along with those of everyone she had ever cared about.

However, instead of plotting her demise, Nero collapsed on the bed, hugging Piper's pillow to his chest. It still smelled like strawberriesâ€¦'_Piper, what had happened? How did they make you snap? I don't blame you. I'd __**never**__ blame you._

Locked in the privacy of Piper's room and clutching the pillow that still smelled like her, the normally calm, composed, collected, and reserved man finally unbound his emotions, losing his cool for once in a great while, trying to make sense of it all. "Piper, why?"

The man had dissolved into the ultimate form of weakness. Nero allowed himself to cry.

35. Flash of Silver

Piper had been hauled to her feet the moment she came to, and Furan shook her by the shoulders, "We will give you one week to think, and then you will talk."

"But I'll tell you anything you want ****now****! Please, I'll tell you, just don't hurt Max! _****Please!****_" she was begging by now.

"Shut up, idiot girl!" Anastasia spat, "He will be fine as long as you ****behave.**** We want to give you this time to ensure that you really want to talk. I'll leave you with your thoughts." She slammed the door, hitting the lights from outside and sending the room cascading into darkness.

By the twentieth day, Nero had almost lost it. All he did was replay the footage of the Hunt, grimacing when Piper's feed went black, and reread every note that was taped to Piper's mirror.

Nero was rewatching the footage again when Nina burst into his office.

"Sir, get up. Brush yourself off and get over this! You're a villain for evil's sake! Plot revenge! But first, get some decent sleep, take a shower, put on a clean suit and shave! I know enough to run this place by myself for a while, and you don't need to keep watching Piper tear through the forest. Go!"

"Fine," he sighed, picking up his Blackbox and leaving a depressing

aura behind.

Nina stretched out behind the desk, before thinking twice and considering cleaning it. She doubted that it was still used only for paperwork. "This is going to be fun! HIVEmind, have a TV wall built in accommodation block seven."

Nero had taken Nina's advice and cleaned himself up before taking a nap. Standing in front of his mirror, he at least _looked _sane.

"Hopeless," he muttered to the man in the mirror, "They're dead, and revenge can **never **bring them back. Revenge will only bring death, and what'll that do? _**Hopeless, forever hopelessâ€¦|**_"

The left wrist contained plenty of important blood vessels, he knew thatâ€¦| "Once, just once, for Piper," he mumbled a nanosecond before the flash of silver.

Nero collapsed into bed, and suddenly appeared in a field of white. He nearly had a heart attack â€" Piper stood only a few feet away from him. _"Max," she smiled, practically strangling him in a hug, "I'm moving on."_

_ "Piper, no," he pleaded, agonized at the sudden change in her demeanor._

_ "Max, I have to. I can't stay n the world of the living for long, or else I will get stuck here. Max, darling, keep our letters. Keep any of my things that you want. Wait a bit for the shock to wear off, and then have Raven and Nina help you go through my room. Please don't hurt yourself over me. Hunt them down and bring them to justice for me. Max, I have to go, but I promise that when your day comes, I will be waiting for you. Promise me you won't hurt yourself," she let go of him, "Promise."_

_ "Cross my heart and hope to die," he nodded, continuing when she raised an eyebrow, "Stick a needle in my eye."_

_ "Eat a human kidney pie," she smiled as they kissed for the last time, "Goodnight, my field agent."_

_ "Goodnight?"_

_ "I'm not truly leaving you, Max. It isn't really goodbye. I love you, Max. Goodnight, my field agent."_

_ "Good night, my angel. Truly my angel now," he smiled tearfully, "I love you."_

Nero woke up clutching a pillow. It was all just a dreamâ€¦| Piper was still dead, and he was still stuck drowning in hopelessness. Four AM; time to get up for Villainy Studies preparation. The world had kept turning, and he had to keep moving with it as long as he wanted to appear somewhat okay.

36. Grasping at Straws

The Villainy Studies class had begun normally enough. Nero had

avoided looking anyone in the eye, which was working out well. People could see the soul through the eyes; exactly what he didn't want to reveal right now. Best to keep the students in the dark for as long as possible.

As he was writing on the chalkboard, he began to speak, "During the Nanking Massacre before World War II, a brutal competition was held, resulting in thousands of women beingâ€¦" he stopped writing and faced the class, "I can't do this. There is something I must tell you."

"Bet Piper's pregnant. That's why we haven't seen her in a while," Otto whispered to Wing.

"Shut up," Wing whispered back, "Look, he's ****obviously**** bothered by something."

"Ssh, both of you," Shelby shot them a glare.

"As many of you know, there was something going on between Piper and I," Nero said stoically, "She was kidnapped on the Hunt and has beenâ€¦ ****murdered.****" He sat on his desk, allowing the message to sink in. "Piper is dead."

"I, I'm sorry Sir," Laura stood up and gave the broken Nero a cautious hug as he blew his nose for what seemed like the millionth time by his count.

"Thank you, Miss Brand," Nero smiled for a fleeting second, "I really do have some evilly good students. But do not pity me. Pity Piper and the pain that she went through at the hands of her captors before she died."

"Sure, like ****you didn't**** cry your eyes out when you heard," Shelby commented under her breath.

"Sir, I'm sorry I didn't let you have much time alone together to, um, enjoy each other," Otto genuinely apologized.

"Thank you, mister Malpense," Nero said as Nina walked in.

"Suit, get out," Nina said, "Go and deal with this. Get some sleep. Do something constructive. Stop moping!" she strode to the desk and practically pulled Nero out of the room. As she shoved him through the door, she noticed a single red line on his wrist, instantly deciding to follow him out.

Once she shut the door, she asked, "Suit, is that what I think it is?" Silence. "Don't do it. We all tried that in the SSK, and it did ****nothing**** to help us. I'm sure Piper wouldn't want you to do this to yourself. What would ****she**** tell you?!" Nina glared at him, waiting.

"Sheâ€¦she would have cried, asking why and begging me to stop. She would have been devastated. Then she would have gone paranoid and taken away anything sharp. She would have made sure I didn't do that again, that I didn't tryâ€¦to join her where she is now," Nero blinked back tears.

"Do you believe in angels? Answer the question, Suit."

Nero nodded, "She's one of them."

"So go ahead. Read, take a nap, do something, but take some time off," she recommended forcefully, "but don't hurt yourself. Then you'll have to answer to Raven and I."

Piper had been overcome by evil dreams, all of Nero, who was so close, yet more out of reach than ever. She had woken up convinced that he would be right there, that he would smile and ask if she was okay and why she dream was so disturbing, that he would pull her closer in a protective embrace, that she would see his eyes light up as soon as she opened hers. She had always loved his eyes, how she was the only one that could read them, how memorable they were, how they went from the color and intensity of a thunder cloud to being filled to the brim with loveâ€|

She had dreamt of pain, of injury, of what they were doing to her poor Max and what they would do if she spoke out of turn, if she said the wrong words; it was awful. Twice a day when the door opened and a metal tray of food was placed down, she stayed away from the beam of light, even though she wanted to see light again. Anything she did wrong â€" if they could see it â€" would be used to hurt her Max.

Piper feared for him, equally as much as she worried about her own safety. All she could do while sitting in the dark was think, and most of the time she thought about the other people there, what they were doing to her poor Nero, and how her every action mattered. _Max, what are they doing to you? Max, I miss you so much. Are they hurting you? Are they torturing you? Max, I love you. Please be okayâ€|_

"Nina," Raven called in as soon as Nina had sent Nero off to his quarters, "We may have a lead. It's ****very**** weak, and I'm grasping at straws, but I have to investigate this. Do us all a favor and don't tell Max, though. He'll kill himself if this leads to nothing."

"Raven, I'm worried he's going to do that already, ****in all seriousness.****"

37. Alive

"So, stealth and evasion. I know a bit about that," Nina began as she walked back into the class, "Let's start with â€" yes, white haired kid?"

"My name is Otto."

"You ****earn**** your name."

"This is Villainy Studies," Otto informed her.

"Very well then, rule one, everyone can be bought for a price. For exampleâ€|"

Piper blinked at the suddenly bright light as she was dragged out of her dark room. Restrained by two boys that would have been Henchmen

at HIVE, she didn't have much of a choice but to follow them to Anastasia. As soon as she saw Furan, Piper blurted out, "Please, I'll tell you anything, as long as you'll keep Max safe!"

"Dear, _telling_ me is not an option," Furan smiled like a mass murderer, "for he died a few days ago, betraying you with his last breath."

"Noâ€|" she sunk to her knees, her guards dropping her as she took the shock like electricity. As she began to cry and say, "Maxâ€|why? How couldâ€| **Max**, noâ€|" she was doing some quick calculations.

She looked up at Furan, stuttering, questioning and crying over Nero. Furan simply smiled the smile of a great white shark. The last smile many animals would ever see before they were engulfed into a scarlet oblivion. As Piper reached up to wipe her tearstained face, she pulled her arms into a yawn-like stretch, elbowing both boys as hard as she could â€" the one thing absolutely **guaranteed **to bring them down crying. As they doubled over, Piper shoulder-rolled up to Furan, punching her square in the jaw before she could react, the resulting fall rendering her unconscious. The guards had straightened up, but the brief distraction gave her enough time to knock them out as they were recovering.

Piper ran, diving out a window and landing smoothly onto the snow covered in glittering broken glass. She reached the fence and scaled it with ease, and an invisible hand latched on to her. "Ssh," said its owner, pulling her up as the doors f the invisible ship opened.

The doors were shut and they took off as quickly as possible. Raven unzipped her thermo optic suit, remarking, "Knocked them out, I take it? You look worse for wear."

"Raven!" Piper exclaimed, "Tell me everything! What happened to Max? Furan said that she killed him."

"Suit!" Nina exclaimed, finding Nero reading in front of his fireplace, "Go wash up, shave, everything else. We have a surprise for you. I'll have food brought up too. You missed dinner again. In fact, you missed some good Chinese food."

"I guess I will. I mean, what's there to lose anymore?" he sighed, closing his book as Nina left.

"Nero doesn't know yet," Nina told Piper as they walked back into the halls of HIVE, "But I'd recommend a shower before you see him. You look like an animal."

"You've been gone for a month now, believed to be dead," Raven informed her as they continued walking.

"Good to have you back, though. Suit's been on depression mode for a while, and running things gets old fast," Nina remarked.

An hour later, Nero sat behind his desk, waiting as Nina walked in followed by Raven.

"News?" he asked grimly.

"One of my leads seems to have materialized. I'll give you a more thorough recap tomorrow. You need some sleep," Raven said, leaving the room quickly.

"Suit, now is the time for your surprise," Nina grinned, "I'm sure you'll like it, but I have one warning: be safe, will you? Now close your eyes and I'll go get it."

"Okay!" he listened as she left, and heard the door open again, followed by a muffled gasp.

"_**Max**_"! His eyes snapped open at the voice that he never thought he would hear again.

**Piper was alive. **

38. What If It Had Been Me?

A.N. - Sorry, everyone! I've been very busy...and anxious to keep typing! Even though I've been away from the computer, I've been planning and writing (and going insane about not typing!).

She had walked into the office alone, flying into Nero's arms as soon as he stood up to greet her. "Piper, oh, Piper, I thought I'd never see you again," he gave her a long kiss, hugging her even tighter.

"Max, I thought you were **dead**. I thought they had you," she whispered into his ear, deeply inhaling the cologne that she had both loved and missed so much.

"I was convinced **you **were dead, angel," he choked back, burying his face in her hair and smelling strawberries.

"I'm so glad you're safe, my field agent," Piper smiled.

Nero positively beamed back, "Angel, I'm glad you're back." He went to wipe a tear from her cheek, but Piper pulled his hand away, pushing up his sleeve to reveal three red marks.

"Oh, Max, **why**? Max, darling, I love you. Why?" she looked into his eyes, hers filling with tears again, "Max, how could I **live with myself** if you died? How could I ever move on? Please, Max, don't hurt yourself. Please don't do this. Max, I wouldn't be able to live. I'd lose too much. Max, my dear, darling field agent," she hugged him tightly, "I love you so, so, **so** much."

"Piper, I'm sorry. Nina already chewed me out for it, I promise," Nero assured her.

Instead of words, she answered by pulling him into his room and holding up the razor blade that had left the marks, now forever etched into his arm and into their memories.

"Max, there are always choices. How could you have done this? You had other options, darling. There are always choices."

"Piper, angel, give me five minutes to change and you can curl up to

me as much as you want. We can fall asleep and not face the world until morning."

Only a few minutes later, Piper was curled up with Nero, holding him as tight as she could, lest she lose him again. "I missed you, my cuddly supervillain."

Nero pulled her closer, saying, "Piper, I thought I had lost you. You were everything I had, and I had lost it all because of Furan. I couldn't have gone on living," Nero kissed her forehead, "Life was too cold and lonely. It was either go on living my life like that or try and join you."

"Then what stopped you, my field agent? Why didn't you justâ€¦ decide to end it? Being the world's greatest supervillain, your survival couldn't have been a mistake," she asked, looking up at him.

"Honestly, angel, I don't know," he sighed, "I don't know."

"Max, what if it had been me? What if I was in your place? What if you had gotten back to find a funeral?"

"Piper, I would have gone ****insane****," he admitted, "I'd have had Raven or Nina kill me. I simply can't live without you."

"You make it sound like I'm some sort of drug."

"Then I'm highly addicted," Nero smiled.

Piper gave him a kiss as he said, "You know what Nina asked me? She asked if the Mile High Club counts Shrouds as airplanes."

"Well, what did you tell her?" Piper laughed.

"I told her that the application was in the mail," Nero smiled, "Well, I would have, but I ended up throwing a stapler at her before I thought of that."

39. Interesting Proposals

Piper woke snuggled up with her Nero. She wouldn't â€" couldn't - have been paid all the money in the world to let go of him. She gave him a kiss as he brushed the dark curls out of her face with a tired smile. The three red marks were still visible, circling his wrist like ropes of fire.

"Max, what would the students say if they saw this?" she asked, yawning.

"It doesn't matter, angel. Only we have Delta Omega Black clearance now. They can't see anything," he winked.

"Max, we are ****not****â€¦"

"No, angel," he smiled, "But out of curiosity, how many kids do you want to have?" he asked.

"Max, I'm not thinking about that now! I've got a whole life ahead of

me to think about that. I just got back, we aren't married, and you just almost killed yourself. It isn't like I don't have a lot on my mind as it is!"

"I'm just ****asking****. You don't have to nag about itâ€|"

That really set her off. "Yes, that's me, ****nag, nag, nag, Max, Max, Max****! Kids are all I'm good for," she stood up, slamming the door as she left, "and of course, there's making you feel good in the process. Talk to me when you get your priorities straight."

By sundown, Nero had still not found Piper. Nina and Raven were cooped up in the grappling cavern, Nina abandoning her search and leaving him with the comment, "Surely she had a better night than ****that****, Suit."

Nero had checked nearly everywhere in the school, and she was still nowhere to be found. She wasn't in her room, nor the library, and none of the teachers had seen her all day. Nero only had one more option, and if she wasn't there, he was planning on putting the school under a low level lockdown.

A few hallways and a retinal scan later, Nero ascended a well-hidden ladder. As he opened the trap door, he was hit with the salty scent of the ocean.

He climbed out of the hatch and onto the slope of the volcano, his eyes still adjusting to the dark when he spotted the human figure silhouetted some twenty feet away.

Piper didn't take the approaching footsteps as a threat, and allowed him to sit down next to her, saying nothing as she watched the momentary green flash over the horizon.

"Piper, I'm sorry that I'm such an idiot." He was met with cold silence as he continued, "I'm sorry I said what I did. I'm sorry that I ever believed that Furan woman, that I tried to join you in the world of the dead, that I tried again after Nina's tirade, that I thought you had died, and I'm sorry that you're stuck with an insufferable idiot like me, someone who is ****infallibly**** stupid. I'm truly sorry, Piper."

She turned to look at him with a sigh and a smile. "Good enough." She pulled him into a hug.

"About your birthday present, angel, I'm sorry I couldn't have given it to you sooner, but between me getting stabbed and you getting kidnapped, there's been no time."

"Max, it's fine. I have you back, and that's all that matters."

Nero stood up, holding out his hand, saying, "Let's go in, angel. Raven and Nina have been looking for you, and they're probably going crazy now that I'm off the radar too."

Piper was leading the way inside when Nero's voice stopped her. "Piper, before we go in, these are for you." He held out a bunch of blood-red roses that matched his cravat.

"Aww, aren't you such a sweet epitome of evil?" she asked.

"That's not your present." Nero smiled as she smelled the bouquet.

Piper looked up to ask, and he was on one knee, holding up something sparkly. "Piper, angel, I love you, and I simply can't live without you. Will you marry me?" Nero asked, his eyes yet again revealing the essence of his soul.

"Oh my Gd, Max, ****yes****," she flew into his arms with a strangling hug, "Yes! Max, I love you! Max, darling, I love you so much!"

"I love you too, my beautiful angel," Nero smiled, giving her a kiss.

From somewhere deep within the central security area of HIVE, Nina turned to Raven and said, "I'm turning off the video feed to let them fall all over each other in privacy. I call not babysitting the first time."

"Fine," muttered Raven, "But they're still going to make you wear a dress."

40. Wedding Day

****A.N.:** A bit of maturity is needed towards the end! Nina is speaking her mind again and implying things! enjoy! ******

Only a few weeks later, there was a crowd queuing up in the courtyard. GLOVE agents and council members were soon mingling in with the students and staff.

That afternoon, all lessons were cancelled and the students were given three hours to get ready, finding formal clothing in their closets, color coded by stream as per usual. Each outfit varied a little, but they were generally alike. To Otto and Wing, it felt unnaturally strange to be out of their jumpsuits, and to Shelby and Laura, dresses were a thing of the past. Franz had fared well; HIVEmind had found a suit pattern big enough for him to fit in comfortably, which surprised them all.

Five minutes before the ceremony, Nero stood at the altar worrying. The last few students and guests had taken their seats, Raven and Nina stood beside him in matching dresses (to Nina's delight they were black), and the Pope, a former Political Stream graduate himself, was in his spot. He had climbed up the hierarchy in the most innocent manner, only to take over as Pope when the previous one had died of "unknown causes". Number One, however, had not approved of this. Nero dreaded seeing the doors open to reveal the Phalanx coming to take him away - or worse, the Reapers, ready to seal Piper's fate without asking questions first.

Otto hummed along with the music as Piper sailed down the aisle beaming at Nero. He yawned (and Wing kept poking him awake) during the Pope's speech about faithfulness to each other until he got to, "Do you, Dr. Maximilian Nero, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do," Nero smiled. _Now would be the time the Phalanx barged inâ€|yes, he would be dragged to Number One alive. But what about Piper? They would __**surely**__ send the Reapersâ€|_

"And do you, Piper Donlin, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?" the Pope asked.

Her gaze was locked with Nero's as she said, "I do."

"The Vatican wishes you both a wonderfully evil life together. Doctor, you may kiss your bride."

A collective cheer went up as fifty different cameras simultaneously flashed.

The dining hall had been rearranged for the party, and a dance floor had been laid out in the center. The first dance, of course, was reserved for the Neros (how odd that seemed to Otto, he would have to call them the "Neros" nowâ€|), with everyone watching as they gracefully swirled around the floor.

"I'm commandeering the DJ's booth soon," Otto proclaimed, "This 'first dance' thing sucks. Majorly."

"They'll kill you," Wing said, sweeping Shelby onto the dance floor as the next song began.

"They're too wrapped up in themselves to notice," Otto replied as Laura tapped her foot impatiently. "I take it you want to dance too?"

By ten, Nero and Piper were about to sit down when they noticed Shiorski the bear talking to Nina.

"Vis one ees telling me some **very** funny stories, very **interesting**, Max," the bear laughed as Nina continued.

"So then *hic* I was like*hic*, Suit what have you *hic* been doing with*hic* all of the duct*hic* tape? So I got *hic* some duct tape*hic* for them*hic* tonight."

"Nina, we aren't likeâ€|that," Piper tried to say.

"Well, *hic* I also got *hic* you some new sheets. Don't *hic* want to *hic* stain the sheets*hic*, Piper."

"Maxâ€|" Piper looked concerned.

"Yes, *hic* Suit there *hic* won't want to *hic* stain the sheets*hic*."

Shiorski erupted into peals of intoxicated laughter as Nero turned beet red. "Nina, it would be greatly preferred if you didn't ruin my wedding."

"But it's *hic* your wedding*hic* night. Go*hic* crazy."

"Nina, what has gotten into you?!" Piper asked.

"Well, he *hic* bet a month *hic* on the Ruling*hic* Council that

I*hic* couldn't drink five *hic* of those Jell-O*hic* thingies*hic*," Nina laughed, "I had *hic* twelve. *hic*"

41. Nina's Speech

****A.N. - PLEASE BE MATURE HERE, PEOPLE. NINA IS MAKING A SPEECH AND HAVING MORE OF HER MISADVENTURES (YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!). THE SONG MENTIONED IS "FOREVERMORE" BY NIGHTCORE. AGAIN, A MATURITY WARNING (NOTHING EXPLICITLY MENTIONED, JUST IMPLIED)****

A few minutes later, Nina took a microphone onstage. The crowd awaited her good wishes, but instead, they were greeted with hiccups.

"So at first *hic* I thought*hic* it was kind of *hic* weird, but then I*hic* got used to *hic* them being thirteen years *hic* apart. I still *hic* think it's gonna *hic* be kind of *hic* awkward tonight, if *hic* you know what I mean*hic*." The crowd laughed, surprised that she wasn't being pulled offstage. "Let's say*hic* that some of the Alphas *hic* have a bet *hic* on Piper. I figured *hic* she'd be pregnant *hic* by now, *hic* didn't we *hic* all? And, congrats, *hic* Suit, but you won't *hic* be Suit later. It's a necessary *hic* part of the step *hic* system, you *hic* see." With a final hiccup, she left the stage, stumbling on her way down.

When the crowd began to taper off around an hour later, Nina made her way to where she thought block seven was. The reader would not take her fingerprint, however, with HIVEmind loudly announcing that this was block six. After a few failed attempts at another scanner, she walked away from the janitor's closet. Apparently there was no portal there.

She stumbled past another door, turning around as a mischievous idea entered her alcohol- impaired head.

When HIVEmind had helped her reach the right door (after ****many wrong turns**) Nina turned the volume all the way up on her Blackbox, giggling as she played a song under the door to Nero's quarters.

We collide, synchronized, as I gaze into your eyesâ€|when your body softly glides, over mine, petrified...I won't hold back, at least I'll try, 'til you end with meâ€|I'll show you everything you've ever dreamed ofâ€|it's the way your body sways, it's your voice that calls my name, it's your lips, the way they tasteâ€|

"Max, tell her to go away and shut up," she heard Piper beg in a voice that she had never heard before.

"Nina, turn off your music and get out of here," Nero yelled, "It's my wedding night after all!"

"He he," Nina laughed, clicking her Blackbox off, "Have fun, Suit. Well, not Suit ****now**** *hic*â€|" She walked off into block three, passing out on the couch, much to the surprise of some Henchmen.

42. Nina is not an Alcoholic

Nina fell asleep in her soup at lunch (she kept insisting that it was breakfast) after she had stumbled out of the accommodation block, wondering what had happened.

While Nero and Piper were practically sitting in the same chair, Nina complained of a pounding headache (while still gloating over her council seat) and yelling, "Shut up!" at anyone who dared to talk too loudly for her. However, she turned to Nero and asked, "So, Suit, I take it you used those sheets? We could hear you from miles away. And Piper, did you have_ fun_ with your field agent last night?"

The staff table glared at her in shock as Piper asked, "Nina, are you still drunk?"

"Nina is not an alcoholic," she hiccupped before passing out again on a basket of rolls.

Twelve days later, Nina ran screaming into Villainy Studies around ten, looking for Nero. He dropped the marker from the new white board, asking, "What's going on? Calm down."

"Piper's throwing up. Because of **YOU**."

As the class let out a gasp, Nero said, "I bet it's just a stomach bug. There were eleven kids in the medical bay this morning because of one, all hacking their guts up. Either way, I should go."

"I'll be here, Sir." Nero rushed off to his quarters as Nina began, "So, Politics, huh? Lesson one, assassinate your opponents carefully."

Nero entered his private quarters to the sound of someone retching up a previous meal. Piper had her head between her knees, sitting on the bathroom floor. "Max, I'm sorry," she said as he sat down next to her, "I'm just sickâ€|eleven kidsâ€|_Gd_." She turned away, Nero holding her hair back as she retched again.

"Maybe you should see Dr. Scott," Nero advised sympathetically, "He'll give you some flu medicine. I know what everyone's thinking, but it wouldn't have happened so soon."

"Max, he's going to want a test."

"Take it and prove him wrong. I bet Nina's collecting betting slips as we speak."

"If you think it's for the best, Max," she smiled slightly before losing the rest of her breakfast down the HIVE plumbing system.

43. The Message

****A.N. â€" OH MY GOODNESS, THE LAST CHAPTER IN THIS STORY! THE SEQUEL WILL BE OUT VERY SOONâ€|I'VE BEEN PLANNING IT FOR A FEW WEEKS NOW. ENJOY!****

The next afternoon, Nina, Piper and Nero were aboard the Shroud, headed for the emergency GLOVE meeting called because of the unauthorized wedding. Nina was saddened by the fact that there was no

food, claiming that billionaire supervillains either couldn't afford to buy chips and salsa or they were way too cheap.

Nero was pale as they took off, dreading walking into the room, knowing full and well that Number One would kill him or Piper, and ****very**** well both. Piper laced her fingers with his as Nina asked, "What's this meeting all about anyway?"

"Nothing good," Piper replied, "It's an emergency meeting." The volcano was now a speck in the distance.

"Duh, this is a ****VILLAINOUS**** council, Piper. What's the emergency?"

Nero spoke up, looking out of the window. "Our wedding was never approved by Number One, although several GLOVE members were there. Iâ€|it was a bit fast, and he doesn't like it without the necessary approval."

"That's not good. Well, if you get fired, my field agent friend, you can always get an underwear modeling jobâ€|for Piper."

"Nina, if I get fired, I'm going to wind up dead within an hour or so. Piper will also end up dead, and you'll be out of a job."

Deep beneath the Parthenon in Greece, the three took their seats around a table. The council gave them strange looks, but Darkdoom greeted them with, "Congratulations again. What has it been, nearly two weeks already? And you haven't wanted to decapitate him**** yet****, Piper?"

"The meeting is now called to order." Number One appeared on the screen, making them all fall silent. "We will now be discussing the matter of this unauthorized wedding. Yes, Nina?"

Nina put her hand down, asking, "Is it okay if I ordered a pizza? I'll pay for it and all, and I'm not sharing, but I just wanted to know. By the way, it's too late to tell me no."

"****WHAT?!****" Number One exploded as the conference room door opened. A pizza man stepped in with a box.

The pizza man departed as Nina said, "Here's a hundred bucks. You were never here. Tell no one about this place _e ego tha kill eseiz_. Or I will kill you. Now go." Nina began devouring her food as the door closed. "I'm not sharing, so don't ask. Continue talking, Shadow Man."

Just as Number One began to speak again, Nina's Blackbox beeped. "Oops. I guess I forgot to turn this off."

She looked at the message and gulped, nearly choking on her pizza, and then passing it to Piper, who turned pale and gasped, "This can't be happening."

"Piper, angel, what is it?" Nero asked, pulling the Blackbox over before Piper could stop him.

Nina, this is Dr. Scott. Nero and Piper seemed to have turned their Blackboxes off for the meeting. Pass this to Piper first.

Piper, the results are back from your blood test. It turns out that you aren't sick. You and Max are going to have a baby. I'll need to meet with you both when you get back.

Congratulations,

_Dr. H. Scott _

Nero took one look at the message and fainted, falling forward, then backward and straight out of his chair, landing on the floor with a thud.

"Max!" Piper yelled, throwing Nina's Blackbox back at her as the council stood around Nero.

He came to just as Nina finished reading the message aloud to the group. "Piper, what happened? Why am I on the floor?"

"Max, I â€|" Nina spared her the explanation by shoving the Blackbox back in his face. Again, he fainted.

Piper knelt down next to him, and when he opened his eyes, Darkdoom immediately told him, "Congratulations, Max."

"Piper, whatâ€|?" he sat up, looking at the GLOVE members surrounding him and the face of Number One on the screen. "Why am I on the floor, angel?"

"Max, I'mâ€|" she gave him a hug, whispering in his ear, "I wish there was a better time to tell you this, but Max, you're going to be a father."

End
file.